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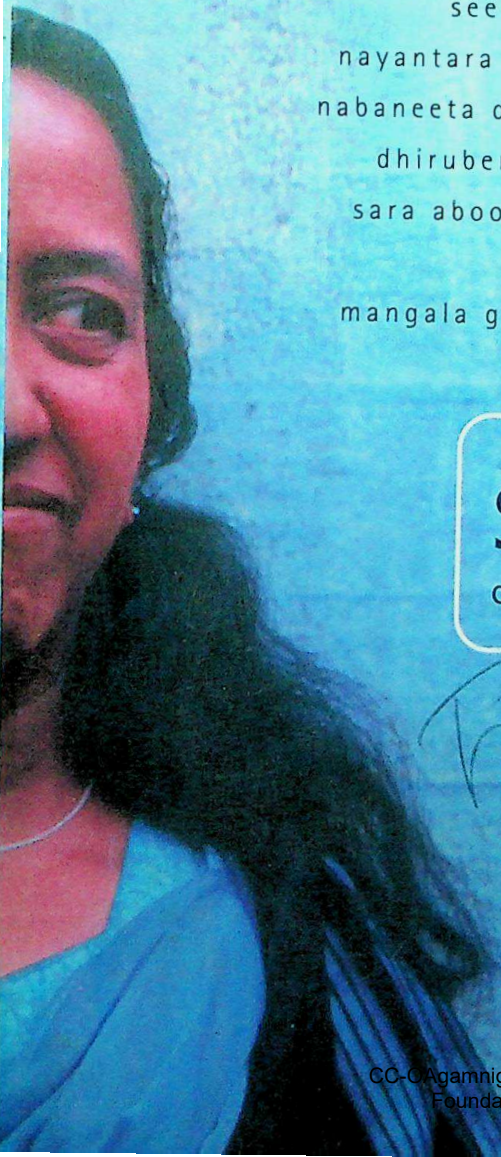
rampiral
shafeeq fatima
shera sunandamma
mridula garg
rukmini bhaya nair
volga pradnya
lokhande anamika
sarup dhruv
jameela nishat vasireddy
seeta devi
nayantara sahgal
nabaneeta dev sen
dhiruben patel
sara aboobacker
bama
mangala godbole



storylines

conversations with women writers

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Women's WORLD is an international network of feminist writers that addresses issues of gender-based censorship. Its aim is to analyse conditions in our various countries, and to develop a strategy for work on these issues internationally. It currently has projects in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America. Women's WORLD (India) is a national network of women writers that deals with diverse issues in women's writing, in all Indian languages and all genres, through workshops and discussion groups and with other organisations of women writers.

Asmita Resource Centre for Women seeks to build a social order which empowers women and promotes sustainable development and peace. It works to support the growth of self-esteem and self-confidence of women in their communities; promote their confidence in analysing unequal power relations; and interpret tradition and culture in ways that strengthen and empower rather than restrict them. It campaigns and networks on gender issues across the country.

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Storylines

Conversations with Women Writers

Edited by
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(Core Group)

अग्निशेखर और क्षमा कौल
द्वारा यह
पुस्तक सप्रेम भेंट

WOMEN'S WORLD INDIA
Asmita
C Fonds

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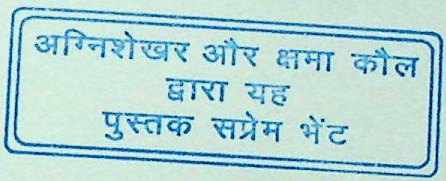

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Introduction

The right to write

Women in India, as we know now, have been writing for more than 2000 years, and they have written about practically everything; yet they have remained invisible, much like women writers in other parts of the world. Everywhere, women have come to writing—writing as legitimate, creative expression, that is—relatively recently, and this has influenced both the circumstances in which they write, and in which they are read and written about. The literary and social context of women's writing is critical to their experience, as writers, in an environment that is male-dominated as much as it is male-centred; women have had to take their place in it (or be denied entry to it) as late-comers, pretenders, aspirants unworthy of notice, unable to meet the standards laid down by those who had only themselves in mind.

The literary landscape in India is one of the most exciting, yet most daunting and complex in the world. In a single country with an unbroken, shared cultural and civilizational history of 5000 years, it is home to 18 officially recognised languages, and more than 400 dialects. To these 18, four more have been added by the Sahitya Akademi —Dogri, Rajasthani, Maithili and Sindhi—as languages with relatively fewer speakers but with old literary and oral cultures. Most languages have ancient scripts and rich literary traditions—but some, like Kashmiri, have had to adopt Devnagiri because their script was destroyed, while others, like Konkani, have no script but a live oral tradition, usually the domain of women. Still others, like Urdu, are embattled,

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especially in the south of the country where Dakkani, born of the marriage between Arabic (spoken by Arab tradesmen to Hyderabad) and local languages (Telugu and Marathi) has been more or less obliterated as a literary language. It used to be called the language of love because it was used by the Arabs in order to communicate with the women they married locally. Dakkani Urdu, which was essentially 'feminine', was gradually 'developed' and corrupted by the more masculine Persianised Urdu of the north. Courtly language and the language of literature were masculinised, while the language of ordinary people, especially women, remained feminine—its marginalisation could almost have been predicted.

This multiplicity of languages makes for an unusual situation in which most educated Indians are at least bi- if not tri-lingual, and are able to read, if not write in, more than one language fluently. The sheer size of the country means that each of its languages has millions of speakers, and a potentially large local audience for the aspiring writer. Historically, some parts of the country—notably Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and the Hindi heartland—have had a more developed literary practice and, therefore, greater visibility, while others have been more progressive; but all offer rich dividends to those who make their mark in them. Yet, here's the paradox: as soon as a writer decides to write in one particular language, whether it be mother-tongue or father-tongue, she more or less closes herself off from 90 per cent of the country. Writers remain 'regional' in India, this demographic billionaire, in a way that those in countries that are a fraction of its size attain national stature. And, again paradoxically, those who choose to write in English, which is spoken by only two per cent of its population, have an unimaginable potential reach because they are writing in a world language. Hierarchies between English and Indian languages, and then among Indian languages, have an impact on the status of Indian literature as a whole, but they also have unexpected implications for women writers, as we hope to discuss in the following sections.

For the most part, women have not had to make these difficult choices or contend with the attendant dilemmas, because they have been out of the running. The mainstream has also been male-stream, in literature as in other fields, and even though women have been

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engaged in some form of literary activity on a sustained basis for a little over a hundred years now, they are still in the margins. Nevertheless, though sparse, women's writing has been significant. Women poet-saints like Sakhubai and Janabai from Maharashtra, Akka Mahadevi from Karnataka, Mirabai from Rajasthan and Lalded from Kashmir created counter-cultural spaces for women, often boldly overturning traditional notions of womanhood. During the social reform and nationalist movements, Mahadevi Varma in the north, Balamaniamma in Kerala, Madame Bhikaji Cama in Maharashtra, Pandita Ramabai, Krupa Sathianathan, Rashsundari Debi and many others struck a blow for women's emancipation through their writing; and Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jehan in the Progressive Writers' Movement took up social issues as part of their social responsibility as writers. Less 'public' women like Lalithambika Antherjanam, Rajelakshmi and Saraswathiamma in Kerala, or Ashapurna Devi broke upper-caste barriers to expose the entrenched patriarchy in Kerala and Bengal. This may have been one reason why Lalithambika remarked that, "In the literary world, women writers were considered in the category of scheduled castes and tribes." The trail-blazing work done by them continues today in the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Sugatha Kumari, Nasira Sharma, Volga, Sarup Dhruv, Joya Mitra, Anita Agnihotri, Maitreyi Pushpa, Pradnya Lokhande, Urmila Pawar, Thilakavathi, Bama and many, many others.

But women have always had to wrest this space, to work from the "invisible margins within the margins" as Mridula Garg puts it. Literary history, no matter in which language it is written in India, has ignored women; when, in response to contemporary pressures, it has had to rewrite it, it has sidestepped the issue by herding them all into one chapter under the rubric of 'women writers'. All women, all more or less the same, all writing more or less the same things. Nabaneeta Dev Sen summed up the situation pithily when she said, "All writing is male, women writing are deviants, hence they are all alike, like the Chinese." By this single act of omission, women have been erased from the literary map of the country, denied their place in posterity. But not only do all writers want to be published and read, they want their names entered in literary history so that future generations can, if necessary, 'un-censor' them.

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Institutional space has been even more recalcitrant. In the fifty-odd years since they were established across the country, not a single state sahitya (literary) akademi has had a woman writer as secretary; important literary and reviewing periodicals are edited by men; and newspapers, magazines and publishing houses are male bastions. In the early history of literary publishing in the country, only one publishing house, Rajkamal Prakashan in Hindi, was run by a woman, Sheila Sandhu. Literary guilds and informal associations of writers are a little more egalitarian, but they seldom wield the kind of power or patronage that the establishment does. The same can be said when it comes to awards and honours—few and far between for women.

As women who have been ostracized, reprimanded, rejected, or dismissed by the establishment know, writing is a subversive activity in patriarchal societies. To take up the pen and write one's destiny is the ultimate transgression, which is why the first and most fundamental censorship for women is the denial of the right to read and write. Women's accounts, when they are written down, are full of stories about their struggles to get educated and the obstacles they encountered on the way. Secrecy, concealment, fear or rebellion recur like leitmotifs in their journals and diaries. Many used male pseudonyms to conceal their identities—a practice still in use among some women writing in Urdu in Hyderabad—and several didn't make their work public at all. Tamil writer Ambai's story, "The Squirrel" is a most evocative rendering of the place accorded to women's writing in the literary archive.

If some of this material is available to us today, it is because feminist publications, periodicals and magazines have documented and preserved it for us. Women have spontaneously, consciously, deliberately, through handbills, leaflets, pamphlets, sourcebooks, magazines and periodicals, theoretical debates, books and journals, created another world and commented on the world they are in. In cultures where education is denied to women, they have demanded it; where it is handed out mechanically, they have insisted that literacy is more than being able to read instructions on an anti-diarrhoea packet. Where access to print is difficult, they have innovated with posters, songs and low-cost materials. Where women have been diffident about writing, they have organised meetings to encourage

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them, first to talk, then write—or they have taken down what they said and then published it. Most of the testimonies by women over the last few years have come to us through transcripts, interviews and documents put out by small groups of women and women's networks.

In India, too, the women's movement has been critical in the recovery of women's writing, in breaking the silence that enveloped their experiences. The question of voice, the power of the word, the subtle, implicit, pervasive, insidious controls imposed on women by culture and society, family and community, have been taken up by women writers and academics, and gradually, a space has been created where women's writing and creative expression can be discussed without fear of dismissal. Women writers are more 'visible' today than they have ever been before, largely as a result of the systematic surfacing of their work by women's presses, critics, teachers and activists who have been part of the women's movement and broadly share its politics.

Not all women who write will call themselves feminist, and there are not too many who are politically active in movements for social change, but even they will allow that the collective energy and analysis and theorising by the women's movement have dramatically altered the context in which they write, and are read. Telugu writer, Volga, says that the shift in Andhra Pradesh can be dated almost exactly to the 1980s with the publication of feminist poetry that openly challenged the patriarchal assumptions of the mainstream. Labour room, birthing, menstruation, pots and pans, kitchens, brooms and dusters marched into the sacred spaces of literature, making for a revolution that drew its strength from that other force for progressive social change—feminism. In Kerala, three conferences organised in the early 1990s by autonomous women's groups, followed by the CPI and CPI(M) on *Pennezhuthu* or women's writing, created a huge controversy on whether one could speak of such a category at all. But the discussions also drew attention to the general neglect of women's writing in an otherwise developed and progressive society, as well as to its deeply entrenched patriarchies. This is anathema, especially to Left orthodoxy. Such clear markers may not be evident in every language or literature in India, but unequivocally feminist writing is to be found in each one. Some published, some circulated, some recited in public,

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some confiscated and burnt, some locked up in a trunk under the bed, some even denied. But all potentially subversive and so, vulnerable to all forms of censorship.

The last book to be formally banned by the Indian government was Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1989, and it would be correct to say that the state has generally not curtailed an individual's freedom of expression, in print, by censoring or proscribing their writings. Yet, the fear of being attacked, vilified or dealt with violently persists, and so we need to look elsewhere for its causes. The interesting shift that has taken place, post-Rushdie, is that state censorship has receded and street censorship, or censorship by the mob, has emerged as a powerful extra-legal—usually, illegal—force. Put differently, the more regressive the state, the more aggressive the mob. The state's failure to uphold and guarantee not just freedom of expression, but of mobility and association as well—exemplified by the assault on Deepa Mehta's film crew and sets in Varanasi—makes this force that much more dangerous. The fact that it forms and disperses with great rapidity means that it is an elusive target, difficult to identify or make liable.

If there have been no outright bans or proscriptions in the recent past, there has also not been a single instance of the state coming out in support of free speech, when such speech has been attacked by self-styled, free-enterprise censors. Recall the attacks on Jamia history professor, Mushirul Hasan, in 1992 when he deplored the ban on *Satanic Verses*; on the works of artist M.F. Husain; on Deepa Mehta's film, *Fire*, and most recently, on media persons covering the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat. What we see, then, is that neither the presence nor the absence of the state is instrumental in upholding free speech; quite the contrary, in fact. This means that, policy or no policy, those who wish to silence can do so, but it also means that whether the state chooses to act or not act, the decision is based on political expediency.

In such a context, the conventional definition of censorship as emanating from states, governments or religious fundamentalists obscures its more insiduous and pervasive aspects, especially as it operates with regard to women's writing. A more critical examination of the circumstances in which women write, publish and are read and

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written about, reveals the gendered nature of censorship and calls for an expansion of its definition. Women's WORLD, an international free-speech network of writers defines censorship as

> . . . any means by which ideas and works of art that express views not in accord with the dominant ideology, are prevented from reaching their intended audience. Such works may be seized or banned; they may be ignored, defamed, diminished or purposely misinterpreted in order to silence their authors and maintain the existing order.

In itself, such censoring is not necessarily gender-based, but on closer examination other ways of silencing women become apparent. "A woman's writing," says Bengali writer Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "is her gesture, and like all women's gestures it is subject to all sorts of social codes." Their writing for example, has been unofficially censored almost since they began putting pen to paper. Although that time seems to have passed, the consensus among women writers till today—not just in India but elsewhere too—is that the literary and publishing mainstream gives them short shrift. Ignoring the work of a writer is almost as potent a form of censorship as banning it. The market has diverse means of 'censoring' or never bringing to light writing that it believes is 'unmarketable'. Many publishers, for example, tend to shy away from voices that are too sharply critical, particularly in conservative periods. Others are inclined to downplay what they call 'area studies' which may refer to a geographical area or a particular group: the underclass, women, blacks, Dalits or minorities.

An age-old gender division of labour leaves women with little time to write at all, let alone write with freedom. Taboos on what is permissible as subject matter exercise a powerful negative influence. The essence of a culture of inequality discourages women from taking their place in progressive writers' organisations and literary establishments. Because there are few active networks of women writers, women are actually more vulnerable to attack, and are compelled to defend themselves individually and in isolation. The question of censorship, then, becomes particular: one woman's misfortune rather than a cultural or social bias that is deeply gendered. The 'gendering' of censorship, whether by state or street, media or mob, family or society—or even by oneself—is distinguished by the degree of

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patriarchal control that is exercised on women's freedom of expression, of access to media, of mobility and of association, over and above the overt, shared censorships that are relatively ungendered.

Forms of censorship

The ideal of freedom has fired the human imagination from time immemorial. Enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Indian Constitution, the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to receive or impart ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers, is guarded fiercely and passionately. Any infringement of that right is perceived as an assault on human freedom and on the values of modern civilization. Literature being a powerful instrument of social change, a large number of writers have been exiled, imprisoned and banned during critical moments in history because of the threat they present to established regimes and social order. Leading Telugu writer and Marxist intellectual, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao once said, "The thing I can do with utmost freedom in my life is writing. No material or emotional limitations can prevent me—there is no other work I can do with such freedom." Krishna Sastri said, "I will flood the world so that it streams with songs of freedom." Writers across the world have seized a pen to change the world they inhabit, and their writings are filled with their vision of the perfect society, of a heaven of freedom. They believe it is their duty to expose and dismantle every custom or institution that has abridged and inhibited human freedom, but the reality is that one reads 'male' for 'human', and the practice of literature has been a purely male activity. Women *have* featured in literature, but as subjects, and as they gradually began to write it became evident that notions of both writing and freedom are gendered. Returning to the gendered nature of freedom itself, it is obvious that while the quest for freedom and its celebration are the prerogative of men who write, women are often left with: "A bird invited me to fly with it—how do I convince the bird that I have no wings?" (Bano Tahera) or "Alas! I've forgotten how to float, how to fly." (Krishna Basu.)

And so the leitmotif seems to be that of disconnection: the disconnection between what women say and what they write; between their spoken words and their silences; between their fathers' and

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husbands' apparent encouragement and support, and their explicit, disapproving silence when a norm is violated. Between women as the subject-matter of writing, and women as subjects and writers. Between language, literature and social movements, and the emergence of women's voices. Between language and gender, gender and genre.

Yet women writers are slowly and stubbornly beginning to insist on their right to say what they feel, and have begun to define the limits on their creativity. A Warli tribal sings of how she is transformed from a nightingale into a crow in her husband's home, while Savita Patki, poet and short story writer, points out that life as a traditional housewife constitutes one of the greatest curbs on creativity. Discussions on censorship, like discussions on human and fundamental rights, have by and large dealt with political and civil rights, and censorship by the state. The contours of gender-based censorship are far more pervasive and far more difficult to define than official suppression. Denied by men and internalised by women, gender-based censorship protects an order that is difficult to define as one that is oppressive. As K.P. Sudheera puts it, gender-based censorship serves as yet another watchdog to sustain an androcentric world. Free speech is essential to bring down the tyrannies that rear their head with frightening regularity, but a speech that dwells on the tyranny of the household, marriage, family and motherhood is too subversive to be tolerated. While political systems can be demolished with ease, preserving the purity of familial and gendered systems seems to be fundamental to the defence of social integrity, which is supranational in character. Political structures can be changed with no risk to society, but any change that threatens relationships and familial institutions seems fraught with the dangers of anarchy, chaos and destructive licentiousness. The arena of the family and marriage is closed to discussion and debate.

The outer limits of change had already been reached by the social reform agendas of women's education, abolition of sati, raising the age of consent, and allowing widow remarriage. These reforms, bitterly opposed by the orthodox in the nineteenth century, represent the utmost reach of the progressive male imagination in the area of women's liberation. The rise of body politics and the second phase of the women's movement in the 1970s and '80s only roused anger,

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insecurity and accusations of anarchic conduct. Why should women's freedom to express their experience of their intimate relationships constitute such a threat to society? What is it that makes the family so fundamental to social security? And why is a woman's identity embedded so firmly in the family? More importantly, why is the ideology of the family and of motherhood so central to the maintenance of social order? Why is it that the obstacles that confront women writers are not perceived as deserving serious social concern? And why are these difficulties dismissed as personal or trivial? The reluctance to recognize women's subordination as systemic in nature, therefore denying its political content and seriousness, is one problem. The other is the perception, deeply ingrained, of society as divided into public and private arenas and the implicit assumption that the private is inferior to, and isolated from, the public. This division serves to invisibilise and delegitimise the oppression that women suffer. Resting on a gender division of labour which insulates the private, and devalues and renders invisible the range of reproductive labour (that includes the care of children, the sick and the elderly), the public/private divide ensures that women's citizenship remains rooted in various institutions of civil society. Never grasped in totality or exercised effectively as the male citizen's rights are, women have yet to appropriate their legitimate space as citizens, regardless of the right to vote. Citizenship has to do with the nation-state and the individual's rights within the state, overriding the claims of family, clan or community. Women, bearing as they do the responsibility of preserving the culture and traditions of their community, continue to be daughters, wives, sisters, mothers and mistresses, defined in relationship to men but denied effective citizenship.

Single women remain an embarrassment and an obstacle to progress. Their unbridled sexuality represents a threat to order and discipline and must be contained and institutionalised. Ironically, while women who sing and dance can be accepted and accorded respect because they appeal to the senses (Nabaneeta Dev Sen points out that Ashapurna Devi gives rise to silent hostility unlike M.S. Subbulakshmi or Roshan Kumari), women who write transgress social norms and must be resisted. By the act of writing women seek to claim a share of public space that has historically been denied to them. For this

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transgressive act they are silenced, rendered faceless, stripped of identity and excluded from the historical record. The only way to overcome this is to conform to accepted norms, limit oneself to acceptable subjects and, most importantly, stick to a language usage that is gendered, sanitized and safe. The family is proud of your 'artistic' achievements as long as your superfast train stops at the junctions; the moment you venture onto the road less travelled censorship begins, says Gujarati writer, Ila Arab Mehta. Writers who stop at the prescribed junctions are allowed representation and provide a sprinkling of colour in the literary arena.

Searching for the mechanisms and regimes of censorship, one finds that the family takes the foreground. Marathi writer, Mangala Godbole says, "For me creativity is like a raincoat. When I enter my house I hang the raincoat outside the front door." Why is creativity a garment that can only be worn outdoors? Sudha Arora, writing in Hindi, points out that when women draw upon the inner space of family and home for their themes they are accused of bringing personal suffering into writing. The clear segregation and exclusion of any critical area of the family from the public realm seems crucial to maintaining the purity of that site. Why is the family, generally assumed to be a supportive structure that provides physical and emotional security, so inimical to creativity? What is the line that differentiates the security of an institution, like the prison, from that of the home?

Malayalam writer, Geetha Hiranyan, says that her love is like a bonsai pipal whose natural growth has been stunted.

The sharp knife of ethics
frequently cuts off
the tap root. . .
By way of warning
Branches are trimmed
each day

The family, signaling the maintenance of honour and dignity, is sacrosanct. The pillars of the community—marriage, motherhood, control of sexuality and tradition—must be kept secure in the interests of preserving the culture of that community. When a male writer questions and attempts to reveal the paradoxes and contradictions of the

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public sphere it is recognised as a legitimate exercise, because power in the public domain can be challenged and overthrown in the interests of setting up another regime that is less oppressive, more equitable and therefore democratic. Creative writing then is, simultaneously, a chronicle of the times and an instrument of change. But when women begin to write, the subversive nature of the act begins to shatter a rigorous silence that is ideological, maintained through force and consent, a silence that is invisible and inexorable. Their writing is perceived as anarchic and dangerously destabilizing. To name or define the source of oppression itself becomes a struggle for sanity and survival. As Hindi poet, Anamika, put it, a woman's life is censored from start to finish, and if not censored then severely edited. Anuradha Marwah Roy said that instead of censoring her writing she censored her life.

And yet women's lives, their loves, their marriages, their realities have always been the subject matter of literature. Written by men from a male standpoint they evoked sympathy, pathos and tragedy, but at no point did they threaten the status quo. Never, except perhaps in the writings of radical men like Chalam who dealt explicitly with sexuality, did they raise a storm of dissent; and while male writers and poets have explored women's bodies and lingeringly laid their feelings bare, when women write of their own bodies or their emotions they create disturbance and dis-ease. Women can be represented but are denied the freedom to represent themselves. While subversive writing, either by men or women, that threatens the state or structures in the public realm will be brought to order by state censorship, when writing begins to threaten a whole patriarchal order (in which the state and other institutions invest heavily) then yet another series of mechanisms come into force. The family and marriage are ideological and cultural institutions, and an individual's psycho-social and sexual selves are gendered. It is difficult to escape from this construction of a self into a 'neutral' domain—itself a fiction. Women who dare to trespass have to grapple with accusations of being unfeminine and destructive, a process both traumatic and emotionally crippling.

For those who choose to represent themselves, several issues arise. The first is the difficulty of rejecting the 'good girl syndrome'. Schooled as women are into the need (and greed) for the approval of family

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and community, risking disapproval or criticism is a serious threat. "Love is an agent of censorship," said Malayalam writer, Chandramathi, and Anamika echoed this with, "Scissors to cut with, a needle and thread to sew my lips with. If I write my subconscious, the earth will be covered with paper." About an act as simple as writing an autobiography, Marathi writer Urmila Pawar says, "Then I have to strip myself naked. Can I do that? The truth is that there are so many levels of censorship that I curb my writing and restrain my hand." This raises the question of what the meaning of self is for men and women. Why does a woman's self have to be cloaked? Is her self limited to the physical body, while a man's self transcends the body to range over community, nation and history? For men, the journey that is recorded is linear and public; for women it becomes an exploration of their most intimate relationships and deepest emotions which make up the warp of their lives.

Women writers, especially in regional languages, feel that their mothers are looking over their shoulders as they write. One Bengali writer tells of how she was dissuaded from publishing a story about the love of an older woman for her student because she (the writer) was now a divorcee and hence, vulnerable. Considering how powerful a symbol of support, shelter and sustenance the mother is in Indian culture it is not surprising that women writers feel their ink has run dry even before they begin writing.

Mother, don't, please don't
Don't cut off the sunlight
With your sari spread across the sky
Blanching life's green leaves

pleads Sa.Usha. Trained into submission and pruned into acceptance by husband and family, women often find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand there is the security and warmth provided by the family/household, and on the other the intellectual/creative vacuum in which they are forced to exist. Household work, monotonous and repetitive, tends to dull the mind and blunt their wits. Often suffocated by the claustrophobic nature of the conjugal household women seek escape through writing.

Women write to survive. They write to break the silence, they

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write in anger, they write to avenge themselves, and they write to tell their stories. Satyavathi says, "We avenge the censorship we face in reality through our writing." A serious endeavour that carries a price. Sometimes manuscripts are hidden, forgotten, destroyed in that anxiety. Whether this act of hiding and destruction is an act of self-censorship or an aspect of family and community censorship, needs to be explored. Thilakavathi, a Tamil writer and police officer, was beaten black and blue for writing and publishing her work. If the private nature of family and marriage is to be kept intact, violence, both physical and psychological, becomes the weapon to control women who defy the limits.

Even writers who are sensitive to the gendering of informal censorship find it difficult to acknowledge that spaces are gendered and that discrimination exists. There is great resistance from them to the idea that censorship can be gendered. This may be because accepting and actuating that reality would make it more difficult to articulate and confront. Naming a problem and identifying an issue entails action and responsibility. Writers as atomized, solitary individuals seldom find support for this; it is far easier to somehow continue with the act of writing, negotiating spaces, relationships and other inhibiting factors. Anamika tells of how all the women in her family, aunts and great-aunts, furiously wrote letters which they never posted. One even wrote to god! The values of forbearance, restraint, patience and refinement paralysed them.

On censorship of subject matter by the community, women writing in Urdu, particularly, indicated that religion, politics and sex are outside their realm. For Muslim women this is a form of direct censorship by the community, but almost all women writers confirmed that these subjects are difficult to write about, due to fear of acceptability, lack of competence and time, and the facility for research. Just as the sexual division of labour confines women to certain tasks and inhibits their access to skills and resources, the nature of women's lived reality, the domesticity, the denial of mobility and a strict code of conduct that pursues them into the public realm, produces a real gendering of subject matter. This raises some critical questions: if the private domain is important and fundamental to human society, then the lived reality of that domain with its compulsions

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and contradictions must be fit subject matter for writing. Reading the 'private' with the same seriousness of attention that we read the 'public' could provide the stimulus for genuine change. What happens, however, is that every possible strategy is brought into play to prevent women from "telling it straight," to borrow Shashi Deshpande's phrase; if they still insist on writing, then their writing is neither read nor acknowledged. The division between genders seems irreversible. As Rukmini Bhaya Nair says,

A woman is a thing apart.
She is bracketed off, a
Comma, semicolon, at most
A lower case letter, lost
In the literate circus.

She is just a striptease
Artist, but when she speaks
Her poems bite, ferocious.

Rhyme and shape, primitive
Beasts, come tamed to her
Endangered species, they
Recognize her desperation.

She wants, she badly wants
Not a fresh lover, strong-man
Or clown, but a new language
In which to hold her own.

Yet even these experiences have been those of urban, upper caste, middle class women subject to the controls of a largely brahminical patriarchy. Censorship assumes very different forms when class and caste intersect with gender. Hindi writer Maitreyi Pushpa points out that, coming from a rural background and a less privileged class, the constraints she faced were neither those of family censorship nor mobility, but of social acceptability. "I started to censor myself when I arrived in a big city. I was in awe of sophistication, of citified ways. I felt a complete misfit in this society and gradually became disempowered. I felt the tyranny of English and the censorship of language."

Class, while disempowering, also censors; so does caste. It is

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important to see how class and caste complicate issues of gendered censorship, altering its manifestations. Women and Sudras were not allowed to read the Vedas; tongues were to be cut and molten lead poured into the ears of those who transgressed. Why is it important to cut off access to knowledge for some sections of society and ensure that they are voiceless? Women are prevented from speaking of a world free of pain, violence and exploitation; and while 'upper' caste women are censored in the interests of tradition and culture, 'lower' caste women are censored in the cause of caste identity. (That more than 50 per cent of our writers are upper caste and Brahmin reflects the larger aspects of censorship in society. It is worth recalling that it was a few upper caste women who converted to Christianity in the last century who actually spoke openly against caste and brahminism.) Dalit women writers are subjected to several levels of oppression which operate as agents of censorship: poverty, lack of access to education, exposure to a wider world and, finally, the control of their own community. Pradnya Lokhande, writing in Marathi, speaks of how Dalit writers find it difficult to expose patriarchal attitudes within Dalit society and the movement. Praised and encouraged when they speak about caste and class oppression they are accused of disloyalty and betrayal when they speak about the patriarchy that operates within the community. "If your sari catches fire can you take it off in public?" is a popular saying in certain Dalit circles, demonstrating the pervasive and absolute hegemony of patriarchy. Brahmanical notions of modesty and honour which are criticized and attacked by Dalit men in all other matters, are adopted uncritically and totally with regard to women.

Political censorship, or gendered censoring within political groups, is yet another contentious issue. A woman writing politically of poverty, caste and social oppression is accepted and applauded. Attempts to raise patriarchal attitudes, democratic functioning and subjective experiences within political groups are discouraged, corrected or punished. Telugu writer Volga recalls how even tabling a resolution contrary to the wishes of the high command can lead to trivializing the issues and humiliating the individual. When Vasanth Kannabiran was about to publish her poem "Waiting", describing the emotional vacuum of the wife of an imprisoned revolutionary, she was advised

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to write instead about the countless tribal and adivasi women who were sacrificing their lives for the movement.

Many women who long to write about politics, power and movements lack the exposure and confidence to write realistically about them; women in political parties who have the exposure, trapped by the twin demands of legitimacy and political correctness, are unable to write about them; even Volga, who has spoken out so clearly about the patriarchal nature of political parties and has moved to feminist politics, says that she is not yet ready to deal with the pain and trauma that writing about her political life will evoke.

There is a sustained effort within all political movements to see that women's writing is directed at the enemy outside; questions about democratic norms, issues of human dignity or the unequal nature of relationships are considered diversionary. And thus the inviolate arena of the family expands conceptually to include the political party. Loyalty and silence are the cardinal virtues of, both, wives and comrades in arms.

Gendering the genre

Content usually finds its own form. This statement, normally accepted as axiomatic in the world of creative endeavour, is not one that women writers in India can take for granted. In a milieu where both external and internal pressures are brought to bear on them far more compellingly than on their male counterparts, women writers walk a perpetual tightrope. Choosing a form for what they want to write may not always be a matter of individual inclination or imagination or even talent; often it may have to do with what's possible, what's permissible and, even, what's publishable. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen says,

> It is not in the process of literary imagination, but in the expression of our literary imagination that we are limited and differ from men. And that is because of the nature of our social conditioning . . . Hence our responses differ and so do our forms of expression . . . there are so many things we want to write, we know we need to write, but do not. Not because we lack literary imagination but because we lack social sanction and the courage to defy it.

Very early in their careers as creative writers, most women identify

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their particular areas of evasion through a complex and involved process which epitomises the very gendered nature of censorship. Their selection of themes is gendered by factors which range from the mundanely physical to the intricately tangled and emotional; each of them, however, arises from the overlapping patriarchies of family, community and society. Within their boundaries, writers struggle to carve out a space for their own creative work.

The most dangerous and, therefore, the most unacceptable woman writer is the one who writes about everything, because she questions every aspect of the existing order. Yet it is not merely the subject, but how she writes about it, that is significant. For instance, it is possible to write as politically—and subversively—about motherhood as it is to write about nuclear conflict. And so although the subject may be glorified, its treatment cannot depart from the socially acceptable. Apart from politics, writers tread most warily around sex and sexuality. Writing uninhibitedly on them may create problems in their personal relationships and make for gossip and innuendo in social circles. The severest social censure, thus, targets that women's writing which deals with sexual politics and transgresses accepted norms. As one of them pointed out, "It is the politics of sex and not the act of sex" that brings the most extreme forms of censorship into play. A number of Telugu poems dealing with sexual politics were viciously attacked by the Telugu literary establishment and Hindi writer, Mridula Garg, was actually arrested some years ago on grounds of 'obscenity' because her novel questioned women's traditional sexual role. Yet those who produce pulp fiction or soft porn are acceptable because pulp and porn serve a function in society—they never challenge sexual politics, reinforcing instead existing hierarchies of sex and power.

The choice of subject inevitably determines the genre. Women are forced to negotiate the line that divides the public from the private but find that the boundaries of conjugality constantly shift back and forth, including and circumscribing their work. The gendering of literature thus affects the choice of subject in two ways: it defines what is appropriate, and then places it on an inferior scale. It also decrees (implicitly) that the concerns of the public realm—religion, politics, war, economics, race—are beyond the intellectual and creative

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capacity of women. The dilemma that a writer confronts is this: while she feels impelled to, and does, write about the tangled skeins of conjugality, family and personal relationships that are the warp and woof of her life, any attempt to radically present the relations of power and authority in this area, or the complex range of emotions—love, hate, anger and envy—that are an intrinsic part of human relations, may make for a censorship so vicious and personalized that she finds it difficult to deal with. Carving out a space for her creativity within these boundaries is one of the greatest challenges a woman writer faces.

Another problem that women confront, as women, is restrictions on their mobility; combined with the patriarchal nature of most political parties and institutions this makes it almost impossible for them to write at first hand about politics, the economy and war. When they do, the very language they use seems to bring a shift in the register of seriousness.

Raising issues of equity, transparency and democracy they confront the barrier of patriarchy which effectively reduces the seriousness and substance of their questions to an ephemeral feminine sensibility—it then diffuses and dismisses them. Writing that is permitted to women then becomes like *kasuti*—an embroidery of memories through which they try to forget their pain and understand their lives. Whether they write in anger or in vengeance, out of longing or love; whether they write because it is their only means of escape from the emptiness of marriage or the oppression of society, writing becomes a mechanism for survival. "I think I would die if I didn't write. . ." said one, and another felt she would simply go mad if she couldn't.

Women who explore the oppressiveness of domesticity and question the legitimacy of marriage, for example, seem to threaten the well-being of the nation itself. Their exploration is defined as sexually anarchic, licentious or immoral—never political. Women are so deeply embedded in the family, marriage and community that the only legitimate space available to them outside marriage has been in religious or revolutionary orders. While they are desexed in religious orders, in revolutionary orders they are quickly mated and made into partners of comrades in arms.

The unspoken conviction is that women's primary social

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responsibility is familial. One Malayalam writer stopped writing for 18 years because she saw a shadow cross her husband's face when someone remarked that he was a character in her story. Conjugal peace is a powerful silencing agent. Women practice silence in preparation for this conjugal peace and ever after, even when it has collapsed. Tamil writer Ilampirai's right wrist was broken by her husband for writing about the collapse of that conjugality.

Besides this externally imposed censorship, writers suffer an internally imposed censorship as well. Their accessible, intimate 'world' is fraught with tensions resulting from an attempt to balance a strong creative urge to draw on personal experience, and an equally strong emotional need to preserve and protect personal relationships. Constantly forced into 'strategic choices', subjects are selected with a vigilant eye on the need to retain one's dignity— 'the single most important virtue of an Indian woman'. Censorship by the family emerges as a major impediment in choosing content and, often, form, too. As narrative after narrative during our ten workshops revealed, ignoring the unwritten rules and crossing the barriers entailed repercussions ranging from emotional torture to physical violence.

Womanly qualities of forbearance, restraint and refinement often predetermine the content of women's writing. Ila Arab Mehta says: "Write of good things and society will respect you. All is fine as long as they don't know what's really going on in your mind." Many women apply this hide-and-seek technique to whichever genre they choose. Concealment is a strategy that women use often, and concealment can dictate the choice of form. Poetry, for instance, allows the freedom to say almost anything. Urdu writers choose the ghazal or nazm which can be filled with unlimited pain and longing. The pain is then abstracted and projected as a human condition rather than a concrete social relation. A novel or short story, by comparison, is far more realistic—the work is personalized, the writer judged by the reader-as-voyeur. The distinction between the personal and the public is too deeply internalized to be accepted or to be distanced and observed. "We all have garbage in our homes. Is it necessary to throw the garbage out where the whole world can see it?" asks Marathi writer Sudha Naravane. That "emotional garbage" constitutes and defines a human life is seldom acknowledged, just as the fact that managing garbage is

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a social responsibility is overlooked. The need to preserve personal reputations and uphold family honour become paramount, determining in varying degrees, the very content of their work. The "needle and thread syndrome" in Hindi poet Anamika's words, seals their lips in an "aesthetics of silence". She says:

. . . And in the end my broom sweeps it all up
Sweeps up the stars in the sky
Mountains, trees, stones
All the shards and splinters of creation
Collects them in a basket
Stores them somewhere
deep inside
In some corner of the mind.

If a writer's vision and dreams are banished to some deep corner of the mind, how can women's writing impact the world to bring change? Is it to be read and appreciated only by women? Although some women have become more confident over the years and are ready to face the consequences of writing that breaks the barriers, attitudes and responses to their work have hardly changed. Writing need not be banned in order to be censored; it is censored when it is ignored, belittled and curtailed in order to maintain the status quo. "We need to be read by our fathers, our lovers, our husbands, our sons, if we want to change the system," said Nabaneeta Dev Sen. But the gendering of literature determines the social relevance of women's writing and usually confines it to them.

The practical constraints of being the good daughter, wife and mother also determine the physical, mental and emotional time and space a writer has. According to Gujarati novelist, Rina Sharma Mehta, "The woman writer inevitably has to combine the 'v' of *vaasan* (vessels) with the 'v' of *vaarta* (stories). It is never an easy task and it often makes me wish I was a man." "*Chai-pani* interruptions", the "spin of domesticity," are exclusive to women writers and cannot but impede their flow of creativity. Very few are able to write every day, and almost none can write without breaks. Their writing is mostly done in the hours when the rest of the household goes to sleep and before it wakes up; often in fits and starts on bits of hastily torn paper

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in the kitchen, in between the chopping and the cleaning, in moments snatched from fulfilling domestic chores and a myriad family duties. This interrupted nature of women's lives often makes for ruptured writing—and ruptured writing does not read well. So writers move from modifying the content of their work to modifying its form. They may abridge it to suit the time and space they have at their disposal, or tailor it to suit propriety. Epics are replaced by novels; novels are placed on the back-burner and they settle for short stories instead; short stories are frequently abbreviated into columns. Creative effort is thus pruned to dimensions that do not pretend to grandeur—there are few magnum opuses in women's writing.

Frequently poetry is a handy alternative, for it can be written anywhere, anytime, in a flash of inspiration—whether travelling in a bus or preparing the day's meals for the family. Poetry has other uses, too. Many women choose it because it lends itself so effortlessly to ambiguity. It can be used "as a shield", giving them the license to express themselves without fear because "each reader understands a poem differently". Not every layer of meaning in a poem can be uncovered by the reader, and each meaning lends itself to many interpretations. And at a practical level, it is far easier to get an occasional poem published in a newsmagazine or journal than a story. One of the crucial challenges for women writers is to visibilise the invisible. Already, a substantial repertoire of women's rich oral tradition of folk songs and poetry is not a part of literary history, and now the gendered divide between the public and private seeks to further marginalise women's writings and perceptions; so that even when women write about the 'public' it is *read* as 'private'. This may be one reason why there are hardly any women playwrights, for instance, because theatre is a very public space and its contact with the viewer, immediate.

The choice of humour may be a strategy to deal with suffering. Writers may turn consciously to humorous prose, for instance, if people start reading personal tragedy into their poetry. "With smart, self-deprecating humour you can always be on par with, if not one-up on, your reader," says Nabaneeta Dev Sen. "If you laugh at yourself, others laugh with you. The question of pity does not arise. . . ." But satire, a much more socially explicit form, is used much less by women.

Both the cathartic nature of writing and the need to record one's

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personal journey draws writers towards autobiographies, but writing a life story is problematic. Dilemmas surface, and often the project is abandoned. Others may not abandon it but keep their personal, autobiographical writing strictly to themselves. There are many manuscripts by women across the country which will never see the light of day because publishing them would mean confronting the reality of patriarchy. So great is the fear of this confrontation that one writer said that if she ever did manage to write her autobiographical novel, she would want it to be published only *after* her death.

Thus, the process of gendered censorship comes full circle for women writers in India. Between complete silence and complete freedom are their continuing attempts at self-expression. Time and again, they face the many dimensions of overt and covert censorship, often forced to contrive rather than freely create. And yet in the process women negotiate the silences and the boundaries, external and self-imposed, stubbornly continuing to write. The truth of the matter is that the dynamics of gendered censorship impinge so deeply on their work that for the majority of women writers, it directs and defines both content and form. They are caught between what is prescribed and what is proscribed, following for the most part, 'man'-made dictates about not only what they can or cannot write, but also about *how* they should write it.

The language of censorship

In a multilingual country like India, the question of literary language cannot but be multi-dimensional. The 18 officially recognised languages constitute a mere fraction of the 1652 mother-tongues listed in the Census of India, 33 of which are spoken by more than 100,000 people. The reality on the ground is even more variegated.

Writing in a language other than Hindi and English is instantly labelled 'regional' and deprived of the status of that which is assumed to be 'national.' This, despite the fact that more than a dozen of the so-called regional languages are spoken by large numbers of people, ranging from 10 million (Assamese) to 215 million (Bengali). In a situation where only a handful of male writers, almost exclusively from the Hindi and Bengali traditions, have so far been acknowledged by the literary establishment as 'national' writers, most women writers

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are doubly disadvantaged. Placed low in the pecking order of the literature of their own language on account of gender, they find themselves at the bottom of the heap in the context of 'national' literature on account of language.

The hierarchies of language are more complex and insidious than they appear to be at first glance. They lead to differences in reach, power and status between and within indigenous languages as well as between them and English (officially recognised as one of the many languages of the country). This, in turn, affects literature and writers in terms of which books are publicised and reviewed in mainstream media that provide 'national' or international exposure, which books are translated into which language within or outside the country, which books are picked up by national or global publishers, which are included in academic curricula here or overseas, and so on. And these realities have further repercussions—for instance, national (not to mention international) literary awards are usually restricted to translated works.

In this scenario, many women writers are twice jeopardised. Within their own languages, thanks to the traditionally dismissive attitude of literary establishments to women's creative output, their books are less likely to be seriously reviewed and to receive widespread publicity; thus less likely to be translated and published in other languages; and consequently less likely to receive awards and be included in literary histories or literature courses. At the national and international levels, thanks to the combined effect of gender and linguistic hierarchies, they tend to bear the brunt of the devaluation of their particular language and culture.

An emerging, possible exception to this general rule is the case of Indian women writing in English. A number of women have been writing in English over the years, and many of them have quietly gained readership and respect as authors. But the spectacular success enjoyed by Arundhati Roy and her maiden novel in the late 1990s has led to a proliferation of women writers in English, as well as heightened public interest in their work, with disproportionate media hype aiding and abetting the process.

As a result, if at all Indian literature is reviewed in the international media and included in the curricula of educational institutions abroad

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(a development that naturally boosts international sales), the reading list is almost entirely made up of titles in English which can be readily served to, and easily digested by, foreign audiences. With Indian English literature, commonly rooted in urban middle class life, the problem of 'translatability' does not usually arise; with literature in Indian languages, on the other hand, not only the language but often the culture are assumed to require 'translation'. As a result, only the most prominent books from 'regional' literatures are deemed worth the time, money and effort, and few books by women writing in these languages make the grade on those terms. The vicious circle of exclusion on account of language, culture and gender continues.

The politics of translation has a number of other dimensions. One relates to the "footnoting of culture," as well-known Tamil writer, Ambai, put it. Referring to the common practice, especially among publishers aiming for the global market, to add footnotes to explain every non-English word, including the names of quotidian food items, she said that every culture has its own mysteries and nuances which need not be papered over to make it more globally consumable and palatable. Nobody footnoted well-known European and Latin American novels, she pointed out, but that didn't prevent anybody across the world from reading, enjoying and understanding them. In view of the alleged 'difficulty' of translating the culture in which much writing by women in Indian languages is rooted, the trend towards excessive footnoting places another hurdle in the path of many women writers.

The other dimension of the translation conundrum concerns the alleged power differential between writers and translators. The question—raised by Gujarati writer and critic, Sonal Shukla,—of whether or not translators constitute "a comprador class" that appropriates the works of Indian language writers to serve their own interests, and unilaterally decides which works by which authors deserve to be published in translation, is clearly controversial; but there is no disputing the fact that whatever translation currently takes place is generally into English, and that even national literary bodies responsible for translating works from one Indian language into others require master copies in English. This not only places a screen between indigenous languages through which literature in each has to pass in order to

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reach readers of another, it also gives translators with access to English an unfair advantage, despite its obvious limitations in terms of capturing the tenor and flavour of local languages.

Many regional languages are already feeling the heat of globalisation and the consequent ascendancy of English as *the* world language. With large sections of the younger generation abandoning their mother-tongues in the hope of gaining access to the so-called global village through English, there is a marked decline in the readership of literatures in several, if not all, other Indian languages. This is a serious problem confronting Indian literature, coming as it does on top of the gradual waning of the reading habit, especially among the young, induced in part by the growth of television and other sources of entertainment. These developments are, in turn, traceable to mutually reinforcing factors such as economic 'liberalisation' and globalisation, the upsurge in consumerism, the advent of satellite-based, cable-linked television channels, the Internet, etc., which have come into play in India over the last decade and a half.

The virtual disappearance of cross-language translation as well as the public library system, both of which flourished in many parts of the country just a few decades ago, have together made access to a variety of literature and, indeed, to books difficult even for those still interested in reading. Women's writing is believed by many writers to be the first casualty of the subterranean literary crisis resulting from these developments.

While the tension between English and other Indian languages is a familiar problem, the existence of intra-language distinctions is less well-known. Certainly, the hierarchy that operates within the seemingly charmed circle of Indian English writers, including women, is fairly well-hidden. Yet those among them who live in India and write primarily for domestic readers often get short shrift—in terms of both publicity and monetary rewards—compared to colleagues who belong to the diaspora or have access to international media and markets, or both.

In addition, with the limited reach of English within the country, the domestic readership of these writers is minuscule compared to that enjoyed by most colleagues writing in indigenous languages. With their relatively few readers scattered all over the country, English

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writers have little link with their diffuse readership, unlike writers in other Indian languages whose readership is more tangible and often more responsive. With virtually no translation taking place from English into any local language (partly because Indian English literature is seldom taken seriously by the literary establishments of other Indian languages), these writers have little hope of reaching out to a wider audience within the country.

The serious disadvantages experienced by a number of Indian women writing in English are rarely recognised. Instead, the legitimacy of Indian writing in English is questioned, and the unfair advantage apparently enjoyed by writers in English is often highlighted, without distinguishing between the different categories of writers whose medium of expression happens to be English.

Asymmetry between languages in India has ancient class, caste and gender-related roots dating back to the days of Sanskrit—the language of kings—and Prakrit—the language of everyone else, including queens. Today, women writers who belong to Dalit communities claim descent from the Prakrit linguistic tradition and many believe they have a distinct voice that is stronger, more earthy and sensuous than that of other women writers. Dalit women often speak of the difficulties of forging a language for themselves, breaking free of the linguistic constraints imposed by both caste and gender, and finding ways to get around sexist and casteist language that reinforces unequal power relations. However, there is a minority opinion within the community that rejects the concept of Dalit literature and language, and believes that good literature is beyond caste and other identities.

Nevertheless, it is clear that language and caste are closely related in a number of other ways. For one, women from the 'lower' castes have traditionally been excluded twice over from education and thereby from the world of letters—on account of both caste and gender. Secondly, as Malayalam writer O.V. Usha pointed out, there are languages within languages, with so many variations across caste lines that there are multiple words in Malayalam even for a single fruit, such as papaya. According to Volga, for each word in the 'mainstream' language there is a Dalit variation; and Pradnya Lokhande suggested that caste is reflected even in turns of phrase and figures of speech. By

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way of example she highlighted the difference between the eating-related instructions that mothers give their children: middle class mothers from relatively privileged communities usually tell children to eat slowly, whereas most Dalit mothers tend to urge them to eat quickly, perhaps reflecting a possibly atavistic anxiety about the availability of food that is rooted in the historic social and economic deprivation endured by these communities.

Apart from caste-based distinctions, linguistic variations emerge from differences in religion, ethnicity and even location within an area associated with a single mainstream language. The denial or obliteration of dialects, folk traditions and colloquial or conversational forms not only leads to linguistic impoverishment, it amounts to a means of silencing. Education also becomes an issue in this context. At one level, it is seen as—and obviously is—an advantage inaccessible to nearly half the country's female population; at another, the 'refinement' of language, the self-consciousness about literary quality and style, etc., that are associated with education can restrain both spontaneity and heterogeneity.

The trend towards linguistic mainstreaming is particularly challenging for women writers, many of whom retain their connection to their specific version of their mother-tongue. Indeed, as Bengali playwright and critic, Paramita Banerjee pointed out, a number of women deliberately use dialects and colloquialisms in their writing not only to enhance authenticity, but to counter the homogenisation of language and to assert the value and validity of linguistic diversity.

At the same time, traditional assumptions about 'literary language' can not only inhibit and even intimidate potential writers, but affect the critical and public reception of those who dare to experiment with alternative linguistic expression. This aspect of the multi-faceted hierarchies of language is likely to affect women more than men because of their overall lack of access to education, in general, and higher education in particular; because of their customary association with the oral tradition; and because they are in any case admitted on sufferance into formal literary spaces.

In a country where most educated people have functional knowledge of at least one language other than their own, a writer's choice and use of a particular language goes beyond mere familiarity and

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comfort-level. A number of women writers who are truly bilingual make deliberate choices with regard to what they write in which language. Some use one language for their creative writing and another for other kinds of writing; some use one language for fiction and another for poetry; some say subject matter determines their choice of language. For a few there is little choice because their own language does not have a separate script or, like Kashmiri, has lost its script due to circumstances of history.

Beyond such personal or practical reasons, however, choice of language is at times a form of concealment or a means of acquiring distance, or both. A number of writers say they choose a language other than their mother-tongue for writing they wish to keep from the readership within their own languages. Others say they prefer English for their non-fiction writing because it allows them critical distance. Nabaneeta Dev Sen characterises English as the "father-tongue" and other Indian languages as mother-tongues. According to her, it is understandable that more and more women are now writing in the father-tongue because it is more powerful and allows more freedom, whereas "mother-tongue stands over you like Mother herself". For some writers it is only natural that they use more than one language to write in. As Ruchira Mukherjee who writes in both Hindi and English put it, "No single language is able to encompass the complexity of my reality. Different facets of one's creative self find expression in different languages."

The question of whether gender shapes language, per se, is obviously not only contentious but relatively unexplored within the literary discourse in India, with some confusion between language and sensibility further muddying the waters. The assertion by a number of writers that language is gender-neutral is at least partly founded on the apprehension that any other position would perpetuate literary ghettos and/or reinforce the bias of literary critics who look for their own notion of 'femininity' in women's writing—such as the person who belittled a Kannada poet, Mamta Sagar's first collection, declaring that she did not know how to write "like a woman" because her poems contained no sounds of bangles or anklets!

While the feasibility and desirability of the kind of 'androgynous' writing supposedly achieved by some writers, both male and female,

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finds favour with a few, others clearly believe that there is little point in evading the fact that gender—like class, caste, ethnicity, location, education and other such factors—does impact language and its use in a number of ways. As Kannada writer, Banu Mushtaq said, if there is such a thing as Dalit language, why do we resist the concept of a women's language? Obviously gender intersects with other identities in the construction of language as in other matters. Ambai pointed out that there are as many women's languages as there are experiences and existential realities; the critical question in this context is not about individual choice as much as it is about the possible existence of a collective consciousness or analysis regarding language and its gendering.

Some writers see gender in operation in their choice of words and phrases, as well as in others' reactions to the ones they choose. They suggest that while self-censorship prevents many women from using certain words and phrases, especially terminology relating to sex and sexuality, refusal to give in to the notorious "good girl syndrome" in this respect often attracts reproof from critics, if not readers. Malayalam writer Chandramathi put it succinctly, "It is as if there is one language for men and another for women," especially in critics' eyes.

Others highlight the difficulties arising from the fact that many words, especially terms of abuse, are derogatory to women. They feel the need to forge a new idiom to make up for the inadequacies and alienating characteristics of the currently available 'masculinist' language, especially for writing on sex, sexuality and sexual violence. Whether they do this by using existing words in a radical and subversive manner, or reclaiming colloquial words and phrases traditionally used by women, or both, in the absence of a new and acceptable language, many women writers clearly hesitate to express their real thoughts and feelings on such subjects.

Some writers speak of the way literary language has come to be defined by that which is used by urban, upper class, upper caste, educated men and has been adopted by many women belonging to the same socio-economic and cultural milieu, if only to gain entry into the exclusive world of high culture. According to them, the subaltern form of linguistic expression embodied in the oral language and used

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by the lower classes and castes, and by women, has invariably been devalued and neglected to the point of obliteration within what is officially acknowledged as literature. Apart from the likely impact of this development on writers, it has an unfortunate tendency to make literature alien and inaccessible to large numbers of women whose linguistic heritage emerges from the oral tradition. As Bengali writer Joya Mitra said, "The particularity of women's language has to be looked for in these decimated oral traditions."

Yet other writers speak of grammar and the fact that the masculine and feminine gender or 'voice' that exists in some languages is commonly either imposed on or interdicted to women. According to Urdu writer Jameela Nishat, if a fellow poet's work sounds artificial and distant, it is because she is denied her own voice—her family does not allow her to use the feminine gender/voice.

Highlighting essential differences between the modes of expression and communication favoured by women and men, some writers speak of "the voice of emotion" versus the "voice of reason," "the breast-beating mode" versus "the chest-thumping mode"; the authoritative, magisterial "father-tongue" that comes from above and provides no space for answers versus the consultative, inclusive, "mother-tongue" that expresses concern and expects response. According to Marathi writer and critic, Pushpa Bhave, there is an understanding within linguistics that to sample a language one must go to a woman or an old person. While she concedes that this may no longer be strictly true with more women entering the 'male-stream,' most of them still tend to use language more metaphorically and relationally than men. For instance, they are more likely to date an event in relation to a personal experience—such as "when I was pregnant"—rather than to a calendar.

According to linguist-writer, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, there are essential linguistic differences between the male and the female. In her research into 'women's language' she discovered a "genderlect" that used more exclamatives, more comparators, more silences, more interruptions, more joint tellings, more politeness, more agreement markers, and more deictics; in other words, in the oral mode, women's speech was rich, subtle and modulated. In her view, while the linear narrative mode of story-telling with a strong pull towards closure is

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the preferred male/masculine form of expression and communication, the alternative conversational mode that follows a more open-ended and 'interruptive' structure, is more female/feminine. The interrupted nature of women's lives could be partly responsible for this difference, but it may also be due to the fact that in women, more than men, the left and right sides of the brain communicate with each other, enabling them to be both verbal/emotional and logical/rational.

However, with conventional definitions and notions of literary language based on the language adopted by elite men, it is only the brave woman who dares to tread a different linguistic path. And this, too, is a form of censorship by language.

Forms of exclusion

"In a thousand years of Andhra literary history, couldn't you find even a single woman? I cannot sit in a meeting which dishonours women thus."

This was Unnava Lakshmi Bai who, after listening to speech after speech during a huge literary conference in the 1940s, stormed out of the meeting in protest. Lalithambika Antherjanam remarked that as far as the literary field was concerned, women were still outcastes. Neither of these reactions are extreme or unwarranted. Even a brilliant poet like dark-skinned Vijjika, who had the self-confidence to remark that if the poet Dandi had described the goddess Saraswati as fair it only meant that he had never read her poetry, was ignored by literary history. If the family has been a primary source of gender-based censorship, literary establishments occupy second place. They are clearly male-dominated in all languages, and they include established writers, literary critics, editors, publishers, the pandits who control writers' associations, the Sahitya Akademis run by the State and, finally, the market.

Women writers who entered the public realm through social reform and nationalist movements, used their newly-gained education to recreate and redefine literature with their writing. An outpouring of short stories, poetry, novels and journals sought to give expression to women's newly-conquered worlds. Vinjamuri Venkataratnam edited a Telugu journal, *Anasuya,* from 1916 to the early '40s in which writers, both male and female, vied with each other to get their works

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published. Gradually, the growth of literary movements led by men, with priorities defined by a male-dominant culture, thrust women's writing to the margins; their concerns became insignificant before the claims of progressive ideals and modernity, their literary efforts crushed beneath the juggernaut of their grandiose political project. In the Central and State Sahitya Akademis set up after independence, the decisions and priorities of upper caste male scholars dominated; no woman has been elected president or secretary of a sahitya akademi in the last 50 years, and even the occasional award that comes their way is patronising—since women 'also' write they deserve a few crumbs. Women who are quiet and conform are invited to Sahitya Akademi meetings; women of achievement who cannot be ignored without affecting the credibility of the organization are exceptions. But slowly, as women writers began to meet and discuss issues of gender-based discrimination the environment began to change. A national seminar of women writers organized by the Sahitya Akademi in Delhi, in 2000, indicates a response to the growing frustration and unrest among women writers.

Assessing significant centenary and decennial literary anthologies one sometimes finds mention of a few women writers, but no attempt is made to analyse how the body of women's writing has altered the contours of literary history, altered notions of literary form or wrought fundamental changes in the body of literature itself. One of the chief reasons for this lack of critical scholarship is the absence of literary critics who can assess women's writing with sensitivity and respect. Literary critics being mostly male, their attitude to women's writing is generally an extension of their attitude to women's economic role: just as they consider women's income and work as secondary, their writing too, is seen to be merely recreational or decorative. As a result women's writing is leeched of its dynamic and vital characteristics. Male writing, on the contrary, is weighted, profound and serious. Literary critics also decide what the subject matter of women's writing should be. Writers who maintain the codes of conduct prescribed for them are picked up and praised because their work does not in any way threaten either their own existence, the world of literature, or male leadership. But if there is even a hint of suspicion that boundaries are being transgressed, they begin to sharpen their knives, knives which

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pierce their very lives. Writers like Lalithambika Antherjanam were worn down; her compatriot, Saraswathi Amma stopped writing; and Rajelakshmi committed suicide. It is no surprise then that all the pioneers, leaders, mahakavis and kavisamrats in India have been men. To this day Gurajada is hailed as the first short story writer in Telugu rather than Bhanduru Achamamba, even though it has been conclusively demonstrated that she wrote the first story.

But it is not only critics who are the problem. Fellow writers seldom read women's writing, and even when they do they rarely discuss it in public, creating the illusion that women write only for women. Well-known writer Shashi Deshpande lamented the fact that although a writer may think she writes for everyone, male readers and critics make her wonder whether she is writing only for women. The male world generally believes that women's writing is about women's lives and has no intellectual content that it can benefit from. And so women's concerns, far from not being global are not even local—they are merely domestic. Ironically, however, male writers who choose to write about women's lives gain a place of honour in the literary world as beacons of women's empowerment.

But long before issues of recognition, awards or rejection arise, the question of women's writing being published at all must be addressed. In most magazines, where first publication takes place, more than 90 per cent of space is reserved for men, and the remaining ten per cent is zealously policed. Lalithambika Antherjanam tells of how editors constantly warned her not to write provocatively and throw herself open to attacks by critics. Similarly, fellow writers and editors warned Telugu writer, Kondepudi Nirmala that writing about labour pains and menstruation in poetry was to reduce its gilded leaves to the value of palm-leaf. Women writers have been told to change, edit or censor their writing for it to be considered acceptable. Whether or not an editor individually subscribes to this point of view, the structures of power and authority in which he functions usually dictate his or her choices.

But the very editors who enforce the codes that govern women's writing do not believe that any such code should govern their personal conduct! Many women writers feel that the power that literary editors wield gives them the licence to misbehave because they are extending

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patronage. But patrons, friends, brothers, fathers and advisors soon transform themselves into tyrants, as rumours circulate that it is these very men who have written whatever is published in the women's names. Gujarati writer Sarup Dhruv describes her struggle to escape from the clutches of one guru just to fall into another's, and only then learn to stand on her own feet. Thus the literary establishment seamlessly replaces the family as an agent of censorship and control.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle that women writers face is the market, a hydra-headed monster. After little magazines and alternative publishing houses—many run by women—began to publish women's writing, it was clear that there was a distinct market for it. Mainstream publishing houses moved in quickly to occupy this space and consolidate the market, gradually destroying the small journals and publishing houses who found it hard to compete with their financial and marketing muscle. Once small and radical houses are wiped out market censorship begins to rear its head. The very difference that made women's writing attractive is no longer acceptable; rather by trivializing and vulgarizing the difference the mainstream 'expands' its markets, and writers are then compelled to write to suit market needs. Subject matter, form, language, length are all laid down as conditions of the 'market'. Gradually, literature that sensationalizes women's issues begins to replace the writing that earlier attempted to explore and lay bare the patriarchal structures within which women's lives are lived; while issues that women struggled to legitimize and bring within the parameters of the literary—rape, sexuality, housework and reproductive labour—are subject to market control. Consequently, the very social change that women writers intended to usher in is defeated by material that is the creation of market forces. Notes of revolt turn into melodies of harmony, and along with the literature she produces the writer also becomes commodified. Publicity attends those writers who are glamorous—but here again, the gendering is evident for glamour is not a precondition for a male writer. The dilemma that confronts most women is whether they should change in response to the dictates of the market, reduce their outreach and limit their readership—or give up writing altogether.

Publishers—especially large, multinational ones—build up markets for a certain kind of writing by, for example, deciding that

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certain genres are preferable to others. So, novels are rated higher than short stories which, in turn, are 'better' in marketing terms than poetry. Demands are made on writers to produce a more 'market friendly' kind of writing, easy on the mind and on the pocket. Certain issues, too, become marketable in unexpected ways: one example was a recent book, *Bitter Chocolate*, on child sexual abuse by Pinki Virani, published by Penguin, which gained from media hype, while another book on the subject published by the RAHI Collective (a group working with survivors of incest), received hardly any attention—a case of a non-commercial book in English being marginalised in the commercial market.

The English poet, Sujatha Mathai, says that there is no place for poetry in the market. It is true that several literary forms are dying out because of market pressures—we see very few memoirs, biographies or autobiographies in India today. Determined by the political economy of the time, the market pushes women's writing towards sensationalism on the one hand, or forces women to write in a traditional conservative mould on the other. There is little space left for those who question tradition and convention.

In an environment where fundamentalism and right-wing forces are rapidly gaining ground and street censorship grows rampant, retaining the space for writing that challenges tradition is critical, for the denial of that space has serious consequences. When attacked, most women writers are isolated. The commonest response is, "Why do women bring trouble upon themselves? It's a desire to sensationalize—let them face the music." Although the literary world perceives and treats women as a homogenous mass women writers themselves rarely meet as a collective with a political purpose. Women write alone, they enter the market alone, and are in fierce competition with each other. They may well come together on common platforms through conferences, consultations, protests and demonstrations, but seldom with any real solidarity.

The market today is a global market, promoting a uniform culture across the world. The importance of English has grown enormously in the last two decades, with a spurt in the number of English medium schools all over the country. The tendency to treat those who do not know English as inferior has increased. The new generation of middle

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class children are ignorant of their mother-tongue and tend to devalue it, growing up without any knowledge of their vernacular literature, untouched by its flavour and colour, ignorant of the literary history of their people. Simultaneously, the market for vernacular literature is gradually disappearing—the space that women writers may have had in the 1960s and '70s has shrunk rapidly. While English is displacing the mother-tongue, television is destroying the habit of reading, and both together are homogenizing culture all over the world. There is little respect for difference in such a culture. Television serials today have no time for the lives of the poor, the lower castes, or tribals; yet thanks to the spread of technology these people all watch television. How can they fail to feel frustrated and dissatisfied when they see this dazzling colourful world in which there is no trace of their existence? As this monoculture spreads across the globe people's habits, ways of greeting each other, spontaneous expressions of joy and sorrow, their taste in food, music and literature are all affected, and this in turn affects the creativity of writers. Women writers rarely have the opportunity to travel, to observe at close quarters and analyse the lives of others; this new monoculture shrinks their spaces even further. Meanwhile the privatization of education places good education beyond the reach of ordinary people, and the new communication technologies are accessible only to a handful. Ordinary families may invest some money in the education of their sons but rarely on their daughters. As for Dalits, the story is much worse because it is impossible for Dalit women to buy education. How then will Dalit women writers emerge? For them even when they persist, there is virtually no market.

This brings us to the question of translation, the serious lack of which deprives a large section of women the opportunity for self expression. It is not merely that translation is difficult, but that the global market has neither interest in, nor space for, diverse cultures. Just as all seed production is moving into the hands of a few companies that benefit from monocultures, the better part of English-language publishing in the world is in the hands of three corporate giants. Within India, because there is a national market for English publications, most writers naturally want to be translated into English. But women writers pay a heavy price because of the politics

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of translation—the importance of cross-language translation decreases and competition in the English market increases, destroying any vestige of solidarity or support.

What can writers and feminist publishing houses do in such a situation? When the existence of alternative publishers and magazines is seriously threatened, where does one begin? Even a small initiative seems a gigantic effort. But there is one fact that we must all recognize. The first generation of Dalits who have entered the field of education are eagerly looking for information, literature, art and culture. To understand the importance of this we need to look back at the last decades of the nineteenth century, at the rebirth of learning that upper caste men and women ushered in to provide new visions and information to the emerging youth. It is important to learn from the strategies that that generation used to reach out, to look at the library movement that entered each village. Today the library system has collapsed; the same State which is willing to spend crores on computers doesn't spare a penny for libraries. What do women writers do in this context?

The interviews with writers in this volume take up many of the issues raised in this discussion, elaborating, extending and deepening both the analysis and the experience of difference. The multiplicity—and simultaneity—of voices reflect the complex social, familial, linguistic and literary contexts in which women live and write, and how they subvert the norm, whether traditional or contemporary. Or, alternatively, how they are compelled to conform. Writers from all ten languages in which our workshops were held are represented here, with the exception of Malayalam which will be featured in Volume II; and, as earlier, age, caste, community, genre and region have been balanced to present as varied and interesting a mix as possible.

Conversations are an on-going open-ended form, to be continued, interrupted, resumed or concluded in an organic manner. In a way, the conversations presented here have been terminated abruptly—perhaps even prematurely—frozen in time. In many cases they were begun much earlier, in other contexts; they may have subsequently changed direction or acquired other dimensions and perspectives. It is entirely possible that what appears here may be repudiated or changed—and, indeed, many writers have amended what they said

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earlier, added to it, even erased it. Reading in cold print what you might have said in passing, somehow alters it significantly: the elusive, tentative, not fully formulated quality of conversation, its thought-in-progress nature is transformed into an authoritative statement, a considered opinion, a definitive comment. Changes of mind then require the conversation to begin anew! In this sense, the ones on offer in this volume should be seen, and read, only as a beginning, the beginning of an exploration carried out sometimes individually, sometimes jointly, in many places, at different times, and perhaps as importantly, at different stages of a writer's life and in very different states of mind.

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Editors

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Nayantara Sahgal

NAYANTARA SAHGAL (b. 1927), belongs to one of India's most distinguished political families, the Nehrus, and is also one of the most eminent Indian writers in English today. She has been a journalist, political commentator, essayist, biographer and novelist, and perhaps the only woman writer in English to have consistently reflected the political life of India in her novels. From her first book, *A Time to be Happy*, published in 1958 to her latest, *Lesser Breeds* (2002), she has followed the evolution of democracy and politics in the country; from its promise of equality and freedom from want to its present crisis of credibility. In all, she has written nine novels, among them the well-known *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1972), *Rich Like Us* (1985), and *A Situation in New Delhi (1977)* about the Emergency. But it was her memoir of the Freedom Movement, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* written in 1954, that brought her early fame; she has continued to write on history and politics both in her newspaper columns and in books. Among the latter are *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power* (1982), and *A Voice for Freedom* (1977). She has also edited *Before Freedom: Nehru's Letters to His Sister, 1909–1947* (2002). Her outspoken criticism of Indira Gandhi during the Emergency earned her the extreme displeasure of India's most powerful woman at the time, and practically consigned her to political oblivion. She remained undeterred in her writing however, refusing to be

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censored or silenced by those in power. No price was too heavy for freedom.

Nayantara Sahgal's prolific literary output is in sharp contrast to her almost reclusive life as a writer today. She lives in Dehradun, far from the literary hubs of Delhi and Mumbai and other metropolitan cities, observing events from a distance. But honours and awards have pursued her wherever she happens to be. She won the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for *Rich Like Us*; and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia) in 1987 for *Plans for Departure*. She was a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, USA, in 1981–82, and of the National Humanities Center, USA, from 1983–84. In 1997 the University of Leeds, UK, conferred an Honorary Doctorate on her, and in 2002 she was given the Alumna Achievement Award by Wellesley College, USA. Honouring her for "bravely confronting authority in defence of the world's largest democracy", the award acknowledged her as "an ardent and eloquent writer whose bravery and passion have inspired all of us as we seek freedom through just democratic governance".

In addition to her membership of several literary organizations, Nayantara Sahgal was Vice President, People's Union for Civil Liberties (India) from 1980–85.

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When did you begin writing and what impelled you to do so?
(*Laughs*) I just began. I began with an autobiographical memoir called *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and . . . that came out of my memories of my childhood and upbringing. It was published in 1954 and I must have written it a year or so before that. I would have been about 27, I suppose, when it came out. So a year or a year and a half earlier is when I wrote it.

What made you think of writing it?
Well, I had a very unique childhood in a family which was involved in the freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi, and that whole non-violent struggle is a period of history which I felt then—and still feel—would never be repeated, and I wanted to recapture the atmosphere of it for myself and my friends. In fact, it wasn't intended for publication but it was immediately accepted . . . and I just went on from there.

When it was published there was a great deal of public discussion about it, I believe. What is your memory of how it was received?
Actually, I thought of it as something completely personal, which would not perhaps be of general interest, and it's surprised me that it has become a sort of minor classic because a new paperback edition was brought out in 1997, at the time of the golden anniversary of Independence—and I think it was very well received at the time because for one thing, it was a look at India that nobody had taken before. In the West people were aware of Gandhi and Indian politics and so on at a political level, and at the level of contemporary affairs, but not from the point of view of a child who had grown up in that atmosphere, the kind of effect that it had on her and her family. So it had a kind of fresh sparkling interest, and even today people keep telling me that they remember that book so well. They may not have read anything else (of mine) after that, but they do remember that.

What made you decide on that absolutely amazing title?
Yes, it really was the essence of the whole book. The struggle for freedom meant long separations from parents and real hardship, financial and emotional hardship for families . . . but it was associated in

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one's mind with elation and joy, and pride that one was involved in a struggle of that kind. Even a child was a soldier in the struggle, and my father's first arrest was connected with having chocolate cake with tea, because my parents wanted to make it a joyous occasion, not a sad one. So that's how the title came about.

Did the writing of Prison and Chocolate Cake, *the bringing together of your personal life as well as the political—did this actually influence the way you wrote your novels, because they all certainly have a political dimension . . .*

Yes, because that happened to be what triggered my imagination. It was my background—one only can write from what one knows—and this was my intimate background. Politics and political events were not something happening only in the country, they were happening to us in our everyday lives. So . . . I suppose I'm the only person who has consistently used political backgrounds. Therefore there's a kind of chronology in my novels which go from Independence on, depicting Indian hopes and fears as time went on. It wasn't part of any plan that this sequence developed, but I discovered long afterwards, when I reread some of them, that they did form a kind of chronological sequence from the high idealism of freedom to . . . well, disillusionment and decay and the way it affected the country, and my stories got built up against this kind of changing atmosphere.

Would you say that they are partly social-historical, partly political, partly autobiographical?

They are not historical in any specific sense, but . . . I certainly have a sense of history and that works as a kind of canvas upon which the story develops . . . and they are not autobiographical in any specific way either, except that there is no question that one's own experiences translate into fiction at some point, maybe ten years after the event, but ultimately that does happen. The only novel that used an actual background very soon after it happened was *The Day in Shadow,* because I had gone through a divorce which deprived me of a decent settlement, put me in very difficult financial circumstances, so I used that as one of the themes of that novel . . .

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Was that difficult to do?

Yes, because it was too close. I felt afterwards it was raw, it hadn't cooked for long enough in one's imagination. I was quite surprised that it was picked up for translation and publication by a very prestigious Italian publisher, and one of the critics there told me that she had been most interested in it because it was the first example she'd read of non-western feminism. I hadn't heard it put that way, but I thought it was true because it depicts a woman's struggle and eventual rebellion in very non-western terms.

What I find most intriguing about your novels is the juxtaposition of the personal and the political, and that's a very feminist creed. Now I don't want to suggest that that's what you did, but the fact that they came together is very, very interesting.

You see politics, or political events, have formed the background of my novels and politics is essentially about power, but power is also the equation between men and women, or between men and men, it's the equation in all situations whether domestic or political. In *Storm in Chandigarh* it's very vividly demonstrated between Saroj and her husband—on the one hand there is the unequal situation between husband and wife on the domestic side, and on the other hand the political story—yes, the two things are interlinked of course, and politics is as much a part of our domestic environment and of family environment as it is of the country, and of gender relations too.

When you were writing them, though, was this part of your concern? Let's say we were to read a political novel by a male writer—would the preoccupations have been so explicitly linked? Would this business of power in the domestic and power in the political or public domain . . .?

I don't think so, because I don't think that men are confronted with challenges to their status, to their rights and that kind of thing, as much as women in our society. So I don't think that would have been the case, but . . . in *my* case you see . . . let me describe myself as basically a conservative whom circumstances drove to rebellion. Circumstances have caused me to step out of line, as it were . . . and that

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is the case with these women, Saroj and Simrit, the woman in *The Day in Shadow*, who are conservative women who will preserve a situation as long as it is humanly possible, and only when there is no other choice possible will they then walk out of it. In *The Day in Shadow* . . . it goes a step further than *Storm* because I have not specified the number of children Simrit has, and that was deliberately left vague. I simply wanted to convey the extreme difficulty she was up against; leaving home with all her children, because there can be no situation as difficult for a woman, no matter how few or many children she has, than to make a decision of this kind, whether she is going to put up with a life of submission within certain constraints of obedience, or whether she's going to break free. There can be no decision harder for a woman who has children and no means of support . . . that's what I wanted to show, that in India the psychology, the conditioning, the culture, everything conditions a woman to put up and put up and put up . . . But there does come a breaking point when self-respect doesn't allow compromise any longer. So it was that kind of portrayal . . .

When you said that circumstances made you a revolutionary, that you were actually quite conservative, do you mean this only in terms of your writing, your personal life, your political preoccupation, or all of them?

Yes, all of them. In my personal life, certainly, because I think I must be one of many, many women who discover that things change if they step beyond a certain boundary. There is that Lakshman Rekha—as long as you are within it everything is fine. You are valued for what you are, you are loved, cherished and so on, but if you choose to demonstrate any degree of independence which impinges on the self-esteem of your partner, well . . . that's where the danger lurks, and so many women have found that to be true. I was not the kind to want brazen independence or complete independence, but . . . you know, the time came when I felt, particularly as I was starting to write, that I needed to make more contacts, to step out of the home, to make friends of my own as it were—yes, space as it's called—when that became a subject for challenge and accusation then I rebelled . . .

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Many women say that they stop writing if it becomes too subversive for them to deal with personally. But in your case it seems that, because you were writing and some part of your identity or your self was being curbed, it enabled you to become a revolutionary. . .

I have an example of the kind of woman you are mentioning, a young Sri Lankan writer who was then starting out, whom I met in London. She was very unhappy and sought my advice, and said that she had written this story in which the woman leaves her husband, and she showed it to *her* husband and he was extremely unhappy because he said it would look bad and show him up in a poor light, though it was not he in the story. . . So she said to me, I can't do this to him because he values me deeply and I have two children who do us both credit and it would hurt him beyond repair . . . so I said, well that's something I can't advise you about, you have to make up your mind about how important it is to you to follow your artistic instinct in this story or not. . . Well, she didn't follow it and she kept her marriage and she has made a career for herself, but perhaps not quite in the same direction that she wanted. So there was that, but in my case, you see, the whole tradition in my family was . . . I was brought up to rebellion. You didn't value security in my family, it was not a consideration . . . you took risks. We lived in a time when the kind of struggle we were involved in, we didn't know what tomorrow will bring, so you see this was very deeply ingrained in me ...

But you say you are a conservative?

Deeply so, by instinct. I would have preferred that none of this had happened. I was a person who would compromise endlessly, but ultimately there comes a point when you must decide, and there I think my whole background and upbringing made me decide the way I did.

And that point came with your writing?

No, I don't think it came with my writing at all. It was still early days for my writing, but it came with the kind of need that writing creates in one, that one must expand one's horizons . . .

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No, what I meant was the circumstances in which one writes . . .
. . . That one was growing, that one needed to feed that growth, one needed to cultivate more people, more interests, step outside the kind of environment which I was then in and which was alien to my childhood. It was Bombay, in a "business" environment, where I was meeting the kind of people I hadn't met before who were very interesting, but I had to make adjustments all the time because I didn't really speak that language or really understand what motivated them, and so on. So you know, I wanted to go beyond it, cultivate other sorts of people. I suppose I was a bit nostalgic for my growing-up past and that kind of thing, so all that was part of it . . .

When we were publishing your letters, I remember you said that you tried to keep your personal life and your writing life distinct. Would you say that you have managed to do that?
Yes . . . the writing life itself . . . it didn't come into conflict with my personal life, but I did have these needs, I felt constricted in a circle of a particular kind. To go beyond it and include other sorts of people in it—I wasn't able to pull it off at all.

And when you actually left that environment, did you find that it made it possible?
Well, there was no question of possible or not possible after that because I was free. There were absolutely no chains on me any more, so I mean, had I wished to take off for Jamaica tomorrow or do something else—I could have done whatever I liked because I had a partner whose cardinal faith was freedom and equality, so that in no way did anything I wish to do for my own interest or pleasure, in no way did he stand in the way. Other things did, I mean one's circumstances, finances, job, all those things, but there were no constraints on my personal freedom.

So did you actually find that freedom is a necessary component for a writer?
I don't know if it is because so many distinguished writers have never had that kind of freedom. If you take women in the 19th century they never had freedom of any kind from all the responsibilities that we

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seek freedom from today, and they produced great work, so I don't know whether it is necessary or not. I only know that *I* found myself unable to function, leave alone as a writer, even as a human being, ultimately, in that restricted atmosphere where rules were laid down—or at least invisible rules were laid down.

And since then you haven't experienced that . . .

No, I've never known that, I've never had that problem. I have had many other problems—I mean, financial constraints made it very difficult for me to write fiction at all, I had to take to journalism. I then started my career as a political journalist and wrote political commentary for 14 years for the *Indian Express* and for many other papers and, in fact, made a name for myself as a political writer . . . whereas I really wanted to write fiction. But I had to put myself on an earning basis, where I had some money coming in every month, because I was in a very difficult position. So that is how I got into newspaper writing and magazines, and fiction got put on the back burner and it has been *extremely* difficult until not too long ago to find time to write fiction. To find the time when I finished doing whatever other writing I had to do and looking after my home, my children, meeting my various responsibilities . . . it was *very* difficult. Only for two novels that I have written have I been able to really write them in peace and freedom, with an office to go into where I shut the door, write all day, and those were my happiest experiences of writing.

Which were the two novels?

Rich Like Us and *Plans for Departure*, both written on fellowships abroad, so I had complete freedom. And it made all the difference, not having this burdensome feeling of having so many other things to look after. And never the freedom while I was doing it, because although nobody in my family interrupted me if they could help it, other things did.

So what it meant was that the writing got deferred . . .

Absolutely. I have never written the fiction that I wanted to, the amount I wanted to—I constantly *crave* the opportunity to sit and write even to this day, because I have had so many other problems in

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the last few years with . . . (her husband's) health and so on. So that's how it's gone.

People do say that for many women their writing life is a series of interruptions. . .

Absolutely. Absolutely. I've so envied men for that reason.

Sometimes these interruptions actually begin to emerge even in writing, in the way that things get written. Did you ever think consciously about the form that you are choosing?

No, I never have. I have never . . . studied writing, I have never set out how . . .

Did you ever attempt a short story, for example?

Yes, I have written several short stories which have all been published, but usually, if I set out to write a short story it would turn into a novel. So it's been a deliberate discipline to say this is going to be a short story now, not a novel. The novel which is going to be published this year (*Lesser Breeds*), I had planned as two short novellas but it turned into a novel. And that's happened with one or two other short stories I set out to write.

What interests me is that professionally, as a journalist, you have written the most abbreviated form, which is the column, but in your creative writing your genre of choice is the longest form, the novel. . .

Yes, that's really the only thing I ever craved, to have the time and freedom to write *fiction*, not some other form.

So is it its imaginative quality. . .?

It has to do with one's point of view—each writer has her own unique one of course, I always felt it would be such a great pity if I didn't put down on paper what no other writer can. Because it *is* different. I was told a few years ago by Tarun Tejpal, who came here to interview me, that political writing is out, nobody wants political writing any more. It's finished, no one's interested. And he may be right that nobody is interested but that *has* been my contribution.

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And so few women writers are able to do it.

That's right, and no male writer in India has done it either, and of the new crop of writers—the kind of thing which is in demand is the expatriate experience and that's fine, it has its own importance, but it's different.

Did your experience as a political journalist or a political commentator in some way corroborate what you call your background and your unique point of view? Did you find that you were actually meshing them? Did it provide you with your fictive material?

. . . Not as a specific event or incident, no, but as a culture, as a political culture. You see, as a political writer I suffered other problems in that I was up against the establishment. I was not writing political commentary at a time when all was well in the country. It was not. It was a period when the government, the Prime Minister, was seeking authoritarian powers, and so on. This was over a period of time before the Emergency and leading up to it . . . so all of this I was recording, and coming up against authority in a very shattering way, really, because I was repeatedly told that if I didn't fall in line all would not be well. For instance I was told, when I thought at one time of getting accreditation as a journalist—to which I was entitled—that it would never be given to me so I shouldn't even make the effort. That kind of thing deprived me of a certain sort of protection and status that I would have had as a journalist, so that I was always alone, always on my own, I didn't ever belong to that fraternity or community. . .

Would you call that a kind of attempt to censor you?

It was not a "kind of" attempt, I think it was a very brazen attempt. At that time, Mrs. Gandhi always said those who are not with us are against us. . . I was at a dinner party once and a man called Punjwani, a lawyer in the Supreme Court, I was told, wanted to meet me and he said to me, I wish to let you know that you are very much out of line with the kind of articles you are writing, and it would be better for you if you modified your . . . views. I was . . . passionate about the things I stood for and I literally flew at him and said, I come from

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lawyers on both sides of my family and I want you to know that the regime today has no respect for the law, and I have no intention of kowtowing to it or to any kind of rules which you set down. I was very angry with him and I left the party. So, you know, hostility could be as obvious and as rude and as arrogant as that, and it was always happening. . . So my political writing was always up against it. The fiction, of course, had to be put aside for a whole period of eight years when I didn't write a novel . . . I think it was eight years between *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us*, and *A Situation in New Delhi* couldn't be published for years because of the Emergency, so there were problems like this all the time. The Emergency formed the background for *Rich Like Us.*

What would you say is your particular contribution to the political novel as a woman writer?

I would say that . . . it was not as a woman writer . . . I would say my particular contribution has been my addiction to democracy—I have that phrase in my head because this year my alma mater, Wellesley College, gave me their Alumnae Achievement award, and the citation said that I had tried to put the struggle for democracy into words.

Earlier, you spoke eloquently about politics being about power, and the domestic arena also being about power; so when I asked you that question what I meant was, is there an experience of power that one has outside the political arena that allows one to observe it in a particular way?

I haven't found that connection in my own writing, because the women in my novels who have a feeling of powerlessness are not in any way political or involved with the political event in the story. In no way. I mean, there couldn't be a more domestic creature than Saroj with her two children and expecting another, and so on. So, they are innocent of all that. They are up against it in a *personal* way . . .

But you have the political life of the country which is not just the backdrop, it is there as part of the story—in a way it is *the story—*

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and your personal stories are also the story—they are not in the background. So you have got both in the balance.

Well, you see, in one novel, *A Situation in New Delhi*, the two come together. In the earlier ones they don't, and then in *Rich Like Us* again, this English woman comes to India and she finds herself up against the lawlessness of the Emergency because her son-in-law is one of its chief lieutenants.

That is an obvious coming together, but what I feel, personally, is that your contribution to the political novel has been to bring the domestic into the foreground and compel a connection between them, even if it is not explicit.

Yes. That would be so with *Mistaken Identities*, very much so, where parda and Islam and a Hindu-Muslim love affair come into it.

And I would say that perhaps with a male writer, because the political realm is complete in itself, they are not involved with the domestic in the same way. I find that many women writers actually shy away from that, they are very comfortable with the domestic but are not at all comfortable with the political, and they would feel quite unconfident about doing both. That's the particular quality in your novels, and I'm wondering whether it was deliberate . . .

No, it was not deliberate. My mental or emotional make-up is a mesh of personal and political, and certainly my childhood was a mesh of that kind. I remember that my father was extremely proud of his three girls, his three daughters, and there was no question of their upbringing being in any way different from a boy's, so it led to freedom of thought and decision-making. I have to say that I owe everything to the kind of upbringing I had. Really.

They say a woman's writing is her gesture, and like all gestures is governed by social codes. Would you agree?

I should think that . . . less and less is one governed by social codes as one writes. Maybe one starts that way . . . Well, it's a small example, but in *A Time to Be Happy* Maya doesn't leave her husband. There is a little story there, a relationship that could have developed but doesn't

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because *she* doesn't step out, and I remember John Masters, when he reviewed this book in a very brash and arrogant sort of way said, what absolute nonsense this is, something *has* to happen between a man and a woman—but in fact it doesn't have to, because in our social codes most of the time it doesn't happen. So, it didn't happen there, but later on . . . I think one breaks codes as one grows towards freedom in the act of writing. . .

That would be in the subject itself or in how the characters develop?
You see, they do develop in a more robust way because *you* develop in that way.

But is the writing itself governed by social codes? Let me put it differently: is there something you have wanted to write, but not been able to because you are somewhat conscious of restraint, even subliminally?
This example I gave you of the young Sri Lankan woman, surely that was an instance of conscious restraint. In my case a situation may have arisen if I had remained in my original set-up, but I don't really believe that it's been there since my divorce. Any holding back there has been would be because of my own temperamental make-up rather than social . . .

So would you ever have censored yourself, but perhaps not in a deliberate way?
Only artistically. Meaning, that if a paragraph sounds better to me one way then that's the way I'm going to leave it. There are artistic constraints. I'm not conscious of any fear in actual self-expression. I've learnt in the past many years to speak out, otherwise I couldn't even have written politically as I did. . .

. . . had you worried about that . . .
. . . because people were always coming up to me and begging me not to, some begging me not to, politically, for the danger of it, others begging me not to because "you belong to the family in power so how can you do this".

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And your own family never ever. . .

No, I have their very full support. My children and I have always been close.

When you published Relationship *was it as trouble-free or worry-free or . . .?*

Well, there, you see, I wasn't writing, I was simply picking out letters for publication. At that point I actually wanted to, because I was going through letters of that period, and when I read them it seemed to me they were telling a story and that it was a very moving story, and in places a very powerful one, and I thought this is something that should see the light of day. And because of the length of time, the thirty odd years that had passed since they were written, it didn't seem to me to be unfair to anybody. My only constraint would have been my mother and my mother-in-law, both of whom were not living, and certainly my mother, I think, in the end would have agreed that they should be published, and my mother-in-law had died long before. No, I had quite the opposite of constraint. I felt it would have some value for a younger generation of women.

What was the response from your children?

My son and my younger daughter—from them I had unreserved support. From my older daughter I also had support, but she did—and this I know, because she appeared on TV—say that she thought it would have been better if I had not. And I felt that she had a perfect right to say so. On the other hand she gave copies of the book to lots of people! (*Laughs*) So she came to her own decision eventually and overcame her own internal hesitation about that. Otherwise I have been continually supported by my children and I've had a really rewarding relationship with them.

If any one of them had actually asked you not to, would that have been a constraint on you?

It would never have occurred to me to ask their opinion in the matter. I was dealing with my time and my life, not theirs. If it had in any way concerned them or impinged on them or their future, yes, but that was not the case, as they were all adults.

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So, other than your political writing has there ever been any opposition to what you've written? Not from the family, but let's say, society, the literary establishment?

Not from the literary establishment, not from any source that I can think of—why would there be any opposition to fiction?

Well, for the same reason that some fiction is banned. . .

Let me put it this way—if there has been any opposition to anything, I am not aware of it. Certainly in any written review or in comments to me I have had only sympathetic or critical comment, not opposition. I haven't experienced that.

How would you see your evolution as a writer?

Zero! (*Laughs*)—I keep wishing that I could just sit down and write a book . . . I think, in terms of evolution, I would speak about my evolution as a human being, not as a writer, and there I have learnt much as I went along. I have had a huge life experience at many levels, and undoubtedly I think all this has affected my writing and given it a kind of . . . range that it might not have had. This chronology I was talking about that I find my novels seem to have had from the first one to *Rich Like Us* ended with *Rich Like Us*, because from the idealistic time of the freedom struggle through disillusionment and decay, ending in dictatorship formed one sequence, and after that I have ranged free. *Plans for Departure*, which went further back in time, had nothing to do with what I had been writing uptil then, and likewise the next novel. I went into a different period and this latest one is, again, very different.

In terms of subject matter or even as an imaginative . . .?

As an imaginative enterprise. Subject matter, of course, is different, the period and the setting, all of those are different. But as an imaginative enterprise I think it is my life experience that enabled my imagination to range free and not be as bound to proceeding along a certain path. . .

Was that something you experienced consciously?

No. Even with *Rich Like Us* I think it was the fact that I could walk

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into an office, shut the door and be free to write, that I found I could let go in ways that I had not been able to do before. Simply because women suffer from this thing of interruption and other burdens, and so on. That was the first time I didn't have those.

You could let yourself go in terms of the imagination?
Yes.

Do you find that fiction satisfies your imagination?
Yes, I get complete satisfaction out of fiction. Of course, writing a novel can be agonizing, but it's worse when you are not writing. One is not really fully oneself unless one is writing. . .

But it's the form for realism. Some writers have said to us that they choose poetry because it's a form of concealment.
Well, realism no longer applies to the novel, it isn't exclusively realistic. It can be impressionistic, it can be surrealistic, it can be so many things.

But your novels . . .
Up to *Rich Like Us* they were wholly realistic, after that they became less so, much less so in language and form. Even in art, if you take abstract art, you don't suddenly one day do abstract art, you go through a discipline of realistic art, and ignore the rules after that. That's why modern trends in art, music and fiction have developed towards abstraction. So it's a development that I think takes place when you feel that that format doesn't suit you any more, you want to say something which doesn't get quite said in those words, so you put them differently. . .

And you think that that has happened to your novels?
Yes, it has.

So there has been an evolution . . .
Absolutely. I suppose that one's experience reflects in one's art form. I don't know whether, say, a nun would go through quite the same

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thing if she is confined to a particular life-style and routine . . . would she then progress from one to another. . .

Would you say that your withdrawal from an active political or public life had something to do with this?

From active political writing, yes. I gave that up when I came to live here in the '80s—I think I stopped writing for newspapers in the '80s. I have never thought in terms of technique—these things in my case just happened—because of what I was going through in private life.

Interviewed by Ritu Menon

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Nabaneeta Dev Sen

POET, NOVELIST, essayist and short story writer, Nabaneeta Dev Sen (b. 1938) is perhaps best loved for her humorous fiction and travel narratives. She published her first volume at the age of 20, before her marriage, and her second at age 35, after her marriage had broken up. She has more than 50 titles in 10 genres to her credit.

Through her fiction she has explored various aspects of a woman's identity, and of changing social values and family structures. She foregrounds issues of the elderly as well as the girl child or the single mother in easy, non-confrontational ways, gently changing the way readers look at common situations to make them more aware of human rights and wrongs. Her fiction as well as her poetry, though very personal at first glance, is intensely political and often charged with social criticism, building awareness about inequalities, injustices and changing cultural values. She has also broken new ground by repeatedly writing about taboo subjects in Bengali literature—like AIDS, drug addiction, trans-sexuality, homosexuality and same-sex love—in a natural, humane way, without any dramatising or sensationalising.

Dev Sen is also a leading academic in the field of Comparative Literature, and is a former Professor and Head of the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta. Having done her Masters from Jadavpur University

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(which earned her several university gold medals), Dev Sen moved to Harvard University for her doctorate in Comparative Literature. However, she got married in the meantime and, following a Certificate of Distinction (1961) from Harvard University, she completed her PhD from Indiana University (1963), USA, where she had moved to be with her then husband, Amartya Sen. Thereafter, she did post-doctoral research at Newnham College, Cambridge University, UK, and was a Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley, USA.

Among the 25 major awards that Dev Sen has received are the Padma Shri (2000), the Bharat Nirman Award (2000), the National Sahitya Akademi Award (1999), the Celli Award of the Rockefeller Foundation (1993), Mahadevi Verma Award (1992) and Kavi Puraskar (1976). She has also been honoured as National Poet, All India Radio (1985).

She has read her creative work at Columbia University, the International Library of Stockholm, the New South Wales Spring Poetry Festival (Sydney), the Melbourne Literary Festival, Museum of Modern Art (New York), Central Park Bandstand (New York), Humboldt University (Berlin), the Rockefeller Conference and Study Centre (Bellagio, Italy), the MER Journal Poetry Evening (Tokyo), the Elliot Bay Book Company (Seattle), the Bunting Institute (Harvard University), the University of Toronto, and the Bangla Academy (Dhaka).

Dev Sen's invited lectures and readings in India are far too many to enumerate. She lives in Calcutta.

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Nabaneeta di, you are an enormously popular writer, and yet people say that your writing is subversive. Do you agree?

I have been very, very fortunate as far as receiving love from my readers is concerned. It is also true that I have been trying to be subversive, and sometimes it has worked and sometimes it hasn't. At times it's gone over people's heads. . . I don't know whether I should mention one of our famous Bengali critics, a woman—very few women critics in Bengal, she is one of them—she did a long review of Volume One of my *Collected Short Stories* and massacred it in a way that I didn't expect, and all the subversion was completely submerged in her reading. She hadn't been able to read me, unlike the common reader . . . so it doesn't always work.

But how would you *characterize it? Would you call it subversive or transgressive?*

. . . Perhaps transgressive would be better. Yes, I think that's a better way of describing them.

And what is it that you think the writing is transgressing?

Well, there are so many boundaries to our lives. Different canons, different myths, old and new—work as the l.o.c (line of control)—curtailing our freedom. I don't know what I should talk about first. You know how I try my hand at everything, I try to work with all the possible genres and in different ways. I like to play around in my writing and I enjoy doing whatever comes to mind. And because I work with the *Valmiki Ramayana* in my academic life—in fact my transgression started there—my research was a detailed linguistic analysis, checking the technique of oral composition in the *Valmiki Ramayana,* which challenged the traditionally accepted identity of the epic, claiming it to be an oral text, a primary epic rather than *kavya,* a secondary epic. I met a lot of obstacles from conservative traditional Sanskrit scholars in India when I tried to consult them. This was in the early 1960s—the work lies abandoned and incomplete after being partially published abroad.

But, getting back to my literary efforts . . . I started playing around with the *Ramayana,* that is what my subversive work is—I attack the *Ramayana* in my stories. There are many stories—the stories of Sita,

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stories of Lakshman, of Shurpanakha, of Hanuman—these are epic-based stories where I have written a subtext. In most cases I haven't changed the story, just changed the thesis and added a new point of view, allowing the reader to look at the *Ramayana* from another perspective, the woman's perspective. These are humorous writings, they make people laugh . . .

But they're not your transgressive writings. . .

Even though, in the end, you can say that I have not changed the story . . . my puranic stories do transgress the patriarchal and brahminical canons, interrogating them . . . they question the human situation in the epics, see them from the women's point of view. I have rewritten stories from the *Mahabharata* as well, about Shakuntala, about Amba, about Satyavati, Draupadi, etc. It is my treatment that makes them subversive. You know I am playful by nature, so when it is reflected in my writings this become subversive, or transgressive. . .

Let me put it to you slightly differently. Do any of your voices cross over from one form to the other, and which of them would you call transgressive and which subversive? It could be the subject-matter, it could be the form, it could be the writing, it could be the treatment. . .

That's a difficult question. Could you define 'transgressive' for me. . .

I would say transgressing social norms, transgressing literary norms—you have said, for example, that a woman's writing is her gesture and like all gestures it is subject to social codes, so in my view the transgression would be the transgression of those codes. Whereas subversion is what you do. So, of all the genres you use, which are the ones that you would. . .

I suppose . . . (*pauses*) in my travelogues I've been quite transgressive, but nothing to do with subversion there . . . in some of my novels . . . I have been transgressive both with the form and the subject matter. Also in my prose I have experimented with the form, tried out my own style of writing critical articles which read like personal essays. . .

Let me see now about the subject matter. . . Ah. . . (*long pause*)

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when my first novel came out it was the middle of the Emergency; it was a political novel, a novel about the Naxalite movement, questioning the role of intellectuals in leading young, ideologically excitable people into terrorist activities and then—not taking the responsibility of what happened to them when they walked into death and disaster. It was a question of betrayal of the youth by their elders. That novel came out during the Emergency, in October 1976, in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* annual Puja number. It was one of the earliest works to deal with the Naxalite movement—*Ami Anupam*, my novel, was published almost at the same time as Mahashweta di's *Hazarchurashir Ma* . . . at that time this was a transgressive thing to do. . .

What about the novel that you wrote on ageing, on old women. . .
Yes, yes, and you know why? The reason for writing that novel was an unusual one. A magazine was pleading with me to write something for their annual number, but . . . I wanted to avoid writing for them, it was kind of sex-oriented, cheap . . . but it was published by a family into which my niece had just been married so it was very difficult for me to say, no. This is India, this is how your professional life gets mixed up with your personal life, you are forced into unwanted social situations . . . it would never have happened to a writer in the West. So I thought of this story, a strong story with a group of menopausal women. . . I'd been thinking about women's ageing for a long time, watching my mother and aunts grow old, and I used to visit the first old women's home in Calcutta, *Nava Neer*, spending time with the women there. The question of ageing was troubling me a lot. So it was about an old women's home with women from very different backgrounds—it turned out to be quite an interesting book actually. It was published in 1988, I was writing it in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia. . . The protagonist is an elderly writer, she has a terminal disease . . . her children don't want to let her go to the Home but that is where she wants to be. . . She uses a chaste, literary language, an elevated diction, she writes in a notebook. . . Almost as a foil to her is another woman who comes from a very rich *baniya* family, and her home happens to be situated in the red light district. In Calcutta you still have such old houses; before the district degenerated into a red light area the houses were there and these families

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didn't move away. They live their lives surrounded by brothels. So in front of these houses they put up signboards announcing 'Grihastha Bari', 'this is a respectable home', to keep clients away! Though this woman comes from a middle class home she has picked up the crude language of the red light area, and loves to use it. But she is a very special woman, an unusual woman who clearly spells out to her daughter-in-law that her husband was no good and she's had many lovers . . . since her poor husband could not produce children, naturally she had to do something about it to keep the family line going. Her son and daughter-in-law live in a posh flat in a respectable area. The daughter-in-law, who is from a convent school, is shocked by her openness which she interprets as crudity, and by her amoral attitude to life which she understands as immoral She can't stand her language, her activities, her morality, everything she says and does is shocking to her . . . The way she talks freely about sex and sexuality in her middle age, bragging about her lovers. Female sexuality is important to her, chastity has no value, she even talks of enjoying sex! For this young convent-educated daughter-in-law sex is surely not something you can talk about, let alone brag about. She finds all her actions and speech in very poor taste. However, the mother-in-law makes it clear to her that "your husband is not my husband's son"... There are many others in the Home from different religious, educational and cultural backgrounds, but the one thing they share is this—no one likes a strange—transgressive?—woman like her. The other women in the Home object to her language, after all it's a respectable place, we don't want women like that. They can't understand how this decent lady-like person, the writer, highly respected by everyone, manages to communicate so freely with this woman—nobody else can bear to talk to her. But slowly they realise that she is very special, warm, generous, practical, concerned about others, and helpful. In the end everyone changes, the woman acts as a catalyst with her honesty. . .

It sounds wonderful! How was it received by this particular magazine, at this particular time?

It just sank—it was published in the wrong place. Even the magazine isn't alive any more. All my novels (I have written 13, plus 2 for

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children) are short and serious; that's why I write only one novel a year, unlike many other Bengali novelists who produce several each year in the annual numbers. Mine are published in *Nabakallol*, which is a popular magazine but not regarded as one of the more literary ones—they are noticed only after they come out as books. This one, *Sheet Sahasik Hemantalok*, was translated and serialised in Malayalam, then published as a book, *Hemantalok*. It is also being traslated into Hindi and English. The problem is the language. I use different styles of speech for people from different cultural backgrounds, and I am told it gets steamrolled into one flat language in the translations.

Let me go back to my question: do your voices cross over from one genre to another? And second, have your transgressive writings had the same popularity as your subversive writing?

(Pause) On the first question, if I understand it right, I play around a lot with genres in my essays, and in my children's writings I often mix poetry with prose. In one of my novels, *Bama-bodhini*—I think it is one of my most important novels both for subject matter and for the experiment with form—I have used several genres, several forms of narration, third person, first person, letters, memoirs, research notes, songs, poetry—this has never been attempted before in Bangla. I don't know about other languages.

As far as the travel stories are concerned, yes, they are *very* popular. They are transgressive, very clearly, very openly, and of course they are personal, all about my own travels, it's not imaginary writing. They are real journeys and they have touched the hearts of my readers. For example, my most popular travel story is a rather funny, irreverent account of my visit to the Maha Kumbh Mela, made on the spur of the moment, totally unprepared and all alone—as a detour from a national seminar in Hyderabad on International Understanding. The other very popular travelogue is about hitch-hiking all by myself to the NEFA-Tibet border. Again unplanned, a sudden detour from the Assamese Women Writers' Literary Convention. These are clearly acts of grave transgression, but my readers approved of them!

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So when you are identifiably yourself in your writing, the transgression is more acceptable? Is that it, or is it that the issues you deal with in your transgressive writing are not acceptable. . .

I think the issues, yes, the issues. *Bama-bodhini* contains many kinds of transgression because I experimented with the form in many ways. For example, whenever it gets too intense emotionally the prose turns into poetry, and there are sections where I use critical prose, pieces of academic work—it's all part of a woman's life.

Would you say that in Bama-bodhini *your voices have crossed over?*

Well, the narrative voices, yes, surely they have, but they were not *my* voices. . .

No, no, when I say voice, I mean the voice that you use distinctively in each of these forms. . .

Yes, yes, it's got many generic styles, it has poetry, it has critical prose, it has letters. . .

Do you think there is a relationship between gender and genre?

Well, grammatically, yes, etymologically, yes. (*Laughs*) But no, the way we've been writing nowadays, I don't think that some genres are meant only for men. That distinction doesn't hold any longer.

What about subject-matter?

Yes . . . for a very long time some subjects were known as women's favourites because they were supposed to be within our experience. Women didn't write about war, they didn't write epics, no long historical novels. . . Women in the West wrote gothic novels and romances, family novels, but real historical novels were not women's forte because we weren't interested in history as written by men. . . In India, at least we have Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*—but in English you can't think of a historical novel like that, can you? She's one of a kind.

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But if we were to give it a feminist reading, question the usual historical novel, can't we say that what women write about constitutes social history?

Of course! When women write historical novels, like Ashapurna Devi's great trilogy, it's powerful social history but it's not what one would call a typical historical novel. It depicts the changes in a society through women's lives seen through women's eyes, through their experiences. You asked earlier about genre, gender and subject matter . . . if we go by the accepted definitions there are some genres which are women's —like, it's okay for women to write romances, it's okay for them to write detective novels, social novels, to write lyrics, to write for children . . . but epics? Historical novels? Plays? Criticism? Satire? Humour? Somehow, these genres remained outside our literary space. . . But things have changed. After being informed by feminist theories we can reclaim these forms, just as we are re-reading women's writings. Now we see that the kind of history we write is what historians *won't* write about. That which is not seen in the historical novels written by men is written by us. It fills that gap. . .

In your short stories, for example, you wrote about yourself, your children, your mother—you wrote about a microcosmic social unit and that, I think, is simultaneously subversive and transgressive.

I'm glad you say that, I would have thought so, too. But if your critic has only glanced at Toril Moi but not understood feminist theory, it becomes really dangerous for us. . . You think of yourself as one informed by feminist theories but continue to read a text through male critic's eyes, use the age-old male critical tools and opinions, and don't see what's there, right in front of your eyes. So you fail to recognize a transgressive or subversive text as such. The critic I mentioned earlier said she was very shocked, and sorry, to see that such a 'highly educated' woman from such a 'good family'—yes, she mentions my parents and my education—is happily writing story after story only about her family matters, covering such a narrow domestic space! Just her mother and her children and her pets, and not one word betrays her education abroad or the wide world she inhabits or the public life outside. She was very unhappy, but relieved, to find at least one story that she could approve of—just one in my whole collection—which

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she felt was serious literature. It was a political story. "If she's capable of writing this," she asked, "then why doesn't she do just that?"

It made me feel like crying and I thought, how harmful can our training be when we borrow male standards wholesale, make them our own . . . it's really very shocking to see that she couldn't read me. She didn't realize that here was not only a microcosm, but also a so-called dysfunctional family which functions pretty well. It's not at all dysfunctional, it's just a family without men. How is a family defined by the anthropologist? Husband, wife, child. What do we have here? A grandmother, a mother, two daughters—this is not a typical family situation at all. Where is the husband? The father? The master of the house? All the women are single—one widow, one divorcee, two are unmarried—and they are having great fun! Not weeping over their unorthodox life style . . . the critic didn't even notice the irony of the situation—that this fun-loving domestic group in fact happened to be members of a broken home because there are no visible cracks in it ! It's a complete household which runs properly, with a bright, lively but bedridden octogenarian woman at its head. People are busy here, the mother goes out to work, the children go to school, the bed-ridden grandma is taken care of, and she takes care of everyone—everything goes on normally, so much so that the critic felt it's an ordinary, commonplace household, a regular family. Why is she writing about mothers and daughters and making people laugh, why not write about something more important? Unfortunately, humour is never given serious attention by literary critics. It never gets the critical respect it deserves. In fact, according to the sociological myth of a broken family, an abandoned wife with female kids is a stereotypically tear-jerking situation which should make people cry, not laugh! Two little girls without a father and a youngish woman without a husband, working hard to earn her bread, with one invalid old lady permanently in bed—it could have been a terrible tear-jerker, really! (*Laughs*) Instead, in story after story they face absurd situations, situations which arise in every family, and they deal with these in even more absurd ways—and solve them. I think ordinary people understand this perfectly. They appreciate it, they identify with it, they love it, they don't think 'domestic' is cheap and artistically inconsequential. Maybe old-fashioned male readers do but younger men, my male

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students at the university for example, read and appreciate my stories. They, too, are informed by feminist theory—no, not theory, feminist ideology—and they have far more open minds, the new men of today. I must say I'm quite pleased with the New Young Man! *(Laughs)* More than with the Older Women of my own generation!

Did you deliberately introduce yourself into your writing?
Yes, I did. When my marriage broke, things needed to be handled differently. Let me explain. My parents were well-known writers, quite prominent in the Bengali cultural scene, so was my husband, he was the most eligible bachelor around when we got married. We were both pretty young then and ours was a very high profile wedding. When the marriage broke, unfortunately again it was a very high profile event. At the time, we didn't know of any other broken marriages among our friends or relatives, either in Amartya's family or in mine. For all four families it was an awful embarrassment, the very first divorce, and it was the same with all our Indian friends as well—the first divorce. So it really wasn't easy to deal with. Anyway, when I came back from England before my divorce—during the period of separation—my poems had become very intense and sad (I had started my literary career by writing poetry). They were good, strong poems, certainly not tear-jerkers, but one could see, here is a woman who is going through a lot . . . I think the poems were giving me away and making my readers feel sad and worried about me. Everybody knew what was wrong, but my whole readership became rather involved with my life through my poems because each new poem told them a little more about what was going on! So I stopped writing poetry for a while, just to protect my emotional privacy, and I think it harmed me in some way because as I started writing prose the flow of my poetry decreased.

I had been writing prose for children, anyway, this had nothing to do with the break-up of my marriage—I was not divorced when I started writing for children—I used to tell stories to my daughters, but now I decided that I would write prose for adults, too, funny stories, about *us*. I began writing about myself because (*laughs*) it's better to be transparent than allow people to imagine things! So, here I was—this was my home, my family, my mother, my daughters, my

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dog, my cat, my car. Things are going wrong, things are getting sorted out—all this became part of my readers' lives. So everybody knows my children by their first names, their nicknames, they know when my dog is well, when it is unwell—it's a good thing because they forgot to pity me, forgot that there was something unhappy lurking darkly in the background. They became part of a pleasant experience, so rare these days in literature, and in life.

So when you introduced yourself deliberately in your text, it worked for you; but when you didn't want to be, people made you part of it. . .

Yes, absolutely. In my poems where I'm speaking through imagery, not mentioning myself, even there people read them as my personal statements—you're absolutely right, Ritu. As I've written before, creative women are always seen to be part of their text no matter what they're creating. If you're making a film you become part of that text, if you're painting something you're part of that, and if you're writing, you become part of that, too—unless you're writing like Mahasweta Devi, about tribals, and you cannot possibly become part, personally, of *that* text.

So—was this the truly subversive thing you did, insinuate yourself into your text so that people can no longer read into it because you've already written it. . .

Exactly. And they had to read what *I* wrote about it, not what they wanted to read into it.

Isn't this unusual for a woman writer, to deliberately introduce herself as the protagonist?

I suppose, yes, it was for the first time. Our Bengali readers hadn't seen that before. Even men don't write like that, laughing at oneself, at the absurdities one creates every day—to write real stories about little things like a cat being stranded on your roof, as well as big things like the Kumbh Mela. Men don't write like that, even women haven't.

So what you did was to make the dailiness of life universal. . .

That's probably what happened—thank you for that question—that

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is probably why people from every walk of life identify with my stories, men and women, both, because my stories happen in every home.

Tell me about your mother—did she have a particular influence on you as a writer?

(*Pause.*) Yes, she did. She did. (*Pause.*) When I started writing as a child—my first poems were published when I was seven in my school magazine, two poems in English, two in Bengali, and two prose pieces in English and Bangla, so my debut was as a poet and a prose writer and a bilingual writer at that! (*Laughs.*) But the poems are rather bad! The prose was good, I still think so. At that time my mother gave me a little black diary to write in and she said, you can write your poems in it. So I wrote on it 'Kabitar Khata' (poetry book). She said, finish one poem then start the next one on a new page. But that's all, nothing else. She didn't interfere, she didn't try to show me how to write or anything like that.

You know, she was a poet, not just a literary person but a very famous poet. She got the Tagore Prize when she was 82, in 1986, for something she'd written 56 years earlier. Apart from being a very good poet she was also a great critic, gave the Sarat Chandra Memorial Lecture on his Centenary at Calcutta University—

Did she have an impact on you as a writer?

Well, she looked at my poems but she didn't try to tell me how to write them. I suppose I never had any problems with my metre or rhyming—she didn't have to correct me. My father was also a poet and a translator, a man of letters, he had learnt Persian and French and German and was extremely well read. He started the first Bengali magazine for teenagers—to this day we don't have a teenagers' magazine—called *Pathshala* in which most of the famous writers of the 1930s, '40s, '50s wrote, but this was started before I was born and wound up before I began writing.

What kind of relationship did you have with your mother when you began writing as an adult?

I had a very important relationship with her as a writer. She was my first reader and she was a ruthless critic, which was such a wonderful

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thing for me. She was a very conscientious reader—everything I wrote she read, and . . .

You know, everything I write, not only poems, even prose, I write numerous times. I keep crossing out and altering, I write and I rewrite—I'm always the last one to submit anything, it has to be physically wrested from me because I'm never satisfied with my work—so a lot of what I wrote had to be copied because after all those rewritings and re-rewritings nobody could decipher what I wrote. Except my mother. Mother had a beautiful, very clear handwriting so she was also my copyist! These were pre-Bengali software days. She copied out my writing, made it legible, criticized my writing, made it crisper—I miss her very much. Even now, whenever I write something I want to show it to her. It was a wonderful thing to have a great editor like her at home. . . You know how it is in India, just as we don't have literary agents in the regional languages, we don't have literary editors—she was my editor, very strict, very good.

What did she criticize?

Well, maybe she'd say instead of this word use another word, and suggest the word, or instead of having this paragraph here, place it there, or you don't need this line, why don't you just skip it. Or else she'd say, no need to explain, leave it to the reader's wisdom, or she'd point out that a line was too long, what you need is a short sentence here. Or this argument is not strong enough, this paragraph is shoddy, needs to be rewritten . . . things like that. She was a proper editor.

What did she think about your introducing yourself in your writing?

She enjoyed it, she admired it—never interfered. . . No, she did interfere once, I'll tell you about that. Because of her I couldn't write a lot of things that I would have liked to write, would have written, but for her. Not that I had written them and she said don't publish, not like that. She had her own ideas about what was respectable and what wasn't. There were topics that I wanted to write on but did not—I think I have been harmed by her in that way. A lot more expression would have been possible for me because it was in me, I was capable of doing it, I *wanted* to, and at that time I had the mental make-up for

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it—because I was desperate. But there were lots of things she didn't want me to write about, too many things. . . In my life she has been a wonderful blessing; at the same time she has been a curse. I'm sorry to say this . . . sounds so inhuman, so cruel . . . but it is a fact. Because all the time I was thinking of her face, how it would change on reading that stuff, and my children's faces—how they're going to face their classmates and teachers in school, they had faced some problems with them already . . . all these thoughts came between me and my writing. And if you talk of censorship, there she was—*she was,* you know, *the censoring officer* in my life, and she stood there as a representative of all the social mores. All the time she would remind me, think of the children before you send something off to press . . . that was bad for my writing, as a free spirit. . .

What is it that you might have written?

There are many things that I wanted to write about at that time. You know, not only subjects, this was. . . I was young, my marriage had broken up, I had seen a lot of things in the West and in my family, and in my life. Things had happened that I wanted to write about. About sexuality, about man-woman relationships, about deception, about loss, about perversion, about . . . all kinds of things that I have not been writing about . . . and I do not know whether I'll be able to write about them any more because the moment has passed. When it was happening before me and I could see, I was witness to a lot of things—I made a mistake, I should have kept . . . a diary, but I didn't. I don't know how people recall things and write. I have a bad memory —but I'll try. I have been through a lot which I would have liked to write about, but for her. . .

You know, there is one more point, a very important point—you know Antara, my elder daughter. She was a naughty child, and both Antara and Nandana had a lot of trouble in school because they were my children. Antara would be naughty, the class teacher would call me and say, "You know, Madam, Nabaneeta was so unruly in class, Nabaneeta won't listen to me, disobedient and impudent "—so I would hear her out and say, "Nabaneeta? Then why have you called me, my daughter's name is Antara." It was a Freudian slip, but I knew who had been the unruly one, the impudent one, not Antara but me.

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That is what she suffered (*voice breaking*). And then little Nandana . . . well, let's not go into all that . . . all this, even though I had been very careful about what I wrote. So on top of that if I had written about sexuality, god knows what would have happened to my children. So—men can write whatever they want, their children won't have to suffer for that, but in spite of my being very careful about what I write both these girls had to go through a lot. Without knowing why. In spite of being brilliant students they were also their mother's daughters, so they had to pay for it. . .

You know, censorship has come from many directions. . .

Did you take up your poetry again at some point?

Well, I continued to write poetry throughout but . . . much less, and always very cautiously. In poetry I'm always careful, anyway, I've never opened myself up in my poems, always used words with utmost caution. . . I've expressed my emotions powerfully but through images and . . . I never had to . . . I don't know . . . in a way it was a good thing that I didn't try to speak openly . . . as far as poetry is concerned self-censorship has been good for me, I think . . . every poet has to practice it in a way. Even earlier, when I was very young—my first book came out when I was in college—even then I had to be careful about my love poems. And you start with love poems, anyway . . . I've always been very, very controlled as far as poetry is concerned so, you see, there has been self-censorship throughout.

What has been your most uninhibited writing?

My most uninhibited writing. . . ? . . . I'm such an inhibited writer when it comes to sex . . . at times I feel so frustrated for writing the way I do . . . It happened because of my mother . . . and because of the Bengali language, . . . it is inscribed with social mores . . . I feel my writings are gagged. . . (*Pause*). . . except, I suppose, my academic writing. I don't think there's any need for inhibition there. . . That's right, I've attacked Rabindranath Tagore, I've attacked Sukumar Sen, I have attacked Valmiki . . . but academic writing is different. The inhibitions that I have problems with in my writing are all sexual . . . and you usually don't face that problem in academic writing. No, other kinds of inhibitions, that of subject matter for example, don't

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hamper me. I have written about homosexuality, about same-sex families when no one did so in Bangla . . . it's basically descriptions of sexual activity that I avoid in my writing. . . Anyway, my most uninhibited writing, I think, are my travel narratives especially the ones on the Kumbh Mela and the one on Tawang, both in 1977. They're the most transgressive, too . . . a woman travelling alone, unplanned travel to unfamiliar destinations, just for fun . . . finding herself among unknown people . . . yes, those are irreverent and uninhibited. . .

You've spoken about mother-tongue being like mother herself. . .
Yes. . .

That's obviously the case with your creative writing, not with your father-tongue?
Yes. I think I would have written very differently if I wrote in English, even those travel narratives. . .

I should write in English now. Honestly. English distances you from your mother and frees your tongue from her moral conditioning. . . When I was in England I started writing in English and it was much less inhibited . . . for example, I have a poem in English called *The Emperor's New Clothes* where the central image is that of a bare maple tree. In it I use the sentence, "Standing naked, in a constant state of erection." I couldn't have written it in Bangla, in fact I have not succeeded in translating it yet, even after 30 years. But when you speak in English you can say shit, you can say *fuck* . . . you've been hearing them and reading them for the last twenty years, these swear words mean nothing. You can say even worse things, read them . . . write them, too. An ordinary word like masturbation, you can use it in conversation, a woman can, but in Bangla even a man needs guts to use these words. It's not easy. Because the language itself *is* inhibited. Women don't use these words in conversation and they don't use them in writing unless you want to shock your readers. Writers who want to be different have used such slang in Bangla but it's an irregular practice, a rebellious, aggressive act that is consciously transgressive. It's a good thing for the literary scene, but the language does not support such transgression.

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Would you say that English gave you some kind of anonymity?
Of course, anonymity. There are two things here: first it's not the language of my home and social milieu, and second, those who read the English stuff hopefully have no personal information about me.

But you have said that, regardless of the language they use, there are limits to women's literary imagination. . .
There was that, too, but I suppose things are changing now. What I said in the 20th century doesn't hold in the 21st century, I hope! You see, we are living through very rapid changes. . . I'm sure younger women, women under 30 writing in Bangla, have a lot more freedom now. The shackles that my literary imagination was bound by, they haven't inherited them. If they are powerful writers they shouldn't have them. If they are still bound by them it's too bad. If I were 30 today, I know I would be different.

At any rate I've decided to write differently now . . . all the inhibitions that have constrained me so far, I'll try to be free of them and write about everything that I haven't written, everything I wanted to write about. . . I'll try. I know a lot of it is lost forever because the magic moment is over . . . the ideas, the emotions that needed to be expressed, that were urging me from within have faded . . . or others have already written them. If the new experiments aren't good I won't publish them, I'm in no hurry. I have this habit of leaving my writing in my drawer for some time before sending it to press. I'll keep trying till I think it's publishable and good enough for the world to see.

You've said, first your mother was the censor, then you censored yourself—have you ever been censored?
. . . If you have already censored yourself then you're not censored, but even so, sometimes you are. . . I'll tell you something. You were talking about transgression in form—that is where I've been censored because I've tried to mix forms. Once, in a very famous literary magazine, *Desh*, they couldn't quite understand what was happening in my article . . . I was introducing a revolutionary Telugu writer to Bengali readers, a woman who wrote this satirical version of the *Ramayana* called the *Ramayana Vishavriksham*, through her book. It was

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much more than a book review. Part of it had to do with personal interactions between me and the writer, my visiting her at her home and staying in her house, getting to know her, talking extensively to her and to her partner about the book, learning about her intentions, about the book's unusual form and matter, etc., because it has not been translated into English, Bengali or Hindi—and then present the book. They decided to do away with the personal part without consulting me, and just censored the whole thing, crossed out pages, took out selected chunks from here and there, and made it fit into the straitjacket of a regular book review. A 45 page thing became a 20 page thing! And there was no mention of the fact that the book had not been *read* by me. It created a lot of confusion among my readers. I'd *never* been censored like that. At first I couldn't understand the reason for it. Then I realised that because I had broken the traditional form, mixed travelogue and criticism, they could not follow me. That was terrible. Whenever you transgress and people don't understand you, a different kind of censorship takes place.

I have been scolded, not censored, for things I have written, by readers. (*Laughs.*) Yes. Not by the establishment. I've not been censored—s-o-r-e-d, but censured the other way! For example, in one of my travelogues I wrote about sleeping in a bed with six men and I got a letter saying, if you write about sleeping with six men do you ever expect your daughters to get married? All kinds of letters. And in the one about my trip to Tibet, I wrote about sleeping in the same room with a man two or three times, so someone wrote saying, even if you had to do that, why did you have to write about it. . .?

I didn't think I needed to censor that because, as I've told you, I wasn't sleeping with that man, just sharing the room. . . Had I been, I would not have written it. It's not that I haven't . . . not as if after my husband left nothing has happened in my life, that's not true. But I've never written about it. I wanted to, I would have liked to—these experiences were intense and overwhelming, and I wanted to write. . . But Ma sitting in my heart said no, no, nothing doing. I mean, I wouldn't have written as me, even then, but I would still have been part of the text! I don't know. . . I suppose I could write so freely about those men because there had been no sexual relations. If there had, I'm sure I would have hidden them. From Ma, and from my readers.

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You think that these women under 30. . .

I think they have the freedom, complete freedom, as much as the men have. Whether they write or not is their choice, but had I been a woman under 30 today I would write all that I couldn't then. Because today's society doesn't control our lives and words the way yesterday's did. The sort of things that are being written now by women were not being written before, the way sex is being presented in literature by some young women, few men have been that forthright. This is a different world now, lots of things are permissible. No holds barred is not always a good policy but good writers benefit from it, and women certainly can benefit from it.

But, Ritu, when all is said and done the regional languages are dying. It really doesn't matter what we do in these languages, they're not reaching anywhere beyond the middle-aged in the cities—young people are not reading them any more except in the villages. The neo-literates and the semi-literates and the middle-aged—they are mostly the ones reading regional literature, the smart young urban readership has abandoned the regional languages. Not only Bangla, all the regional languages have been abandoned by teenagers and those in their twenties. They are reading the language that will carry them across their regional boundaries. That's why I'm so worried. To tell you the truth, I'm *very* worried.

Many years ago, in 1971, when I started writing in English, I mean I was published in English in a few literary magazines in the UK and the USA, my mother said, "This is it, now don't write in Bangla any more. Just continue to write in English, that is the language of tomorrow. Bengali is the language of yesterday." That was 1971! I was shocked at my mother's lack of loyalty to Bangla! I wrote in Bangla because it was a political choice for me. I couldn't understand why my mother was saying such horrible things! Here she was, a celebrated Bengali writer herself and the wife of another, how could she say leave Bangla, write in English? Now I can see what a far-sighted woman she was! She could foresee the globalised literary world.

One last question: this slogan, the personal is political—does it have any relationship to your writing?

Yes. I. . . I still believe in that slogan. I think for women in South Asia

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it's still very important. I know it is thirty years old and is challenged by some, but it's still true for us. There's no reason yet why *we* should challenge that. I wouldn't, in my case it has been true. If you look at my writings you can see the truth of it—I'm glad you asked because my case proves that the personal *is* political. And, you know, it's also true that my writing has created a relationship between me and my readers . . . the amount of warmth and personal response I have received from my readers! Political, personal, whatever you call it, it's reaching out. I'm not a social worker, I'm just a writer, but I have been fortunate enough to have a similar effect on some people. I have told you so many stories of my encounters, and continued contact with, my readers. People feel they can trust me, they feel I will understand. They feel I am of some use to them when they need human warmth. My writing is obviously creating a bridge between these individuals and myself so that they feel I'm part of their lives and, in a way, they become part of mine, too. . . It's a blessing . . . what more can I expect from life? Or from art?

Interviewed by Ritu Menon

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Dhiruben Patel

DHIRUBEN PATEL (b. 1926) is in the process of writing her eighteenth novel. Her very first exquisitely crafted novel in the early 1950s—*Vadvanaal* (Symbol of Fire)—brought her a great deal of fame but she did not write a second for the next few years. She had always known she was going to be a writer and made major decisions in life with that in mind. She opted to stay single because, as she says, "I really felt that it is very difficult to be committed to both (marriage and writing). It is like trying to play with two balls in two hands at the same time. Your performance should be excellent in what you do and that, too, for your own sake. . ."

One of the most respected senior writers in Gujarati today, Dhiruben's composure is enviable. Not for her the insecurity and competitiveness of publishing or perishing. She is disciplined and prolific but selective about what she will write and when. She has published five collections of short stories, a great deal of children's literature, works of humour, scripts for radio and TV serials, translations and plays, one of which *Bhavni Bhavai*, was originally written for the film by the same title. The only time Dhiruben was known to have expressed her pain and rage publicly was when the film was produced without credit to her, although she had won awards for the dialogues and songs in it.

When Dhiruben won the very prestigious Ranjitram Suvarnachandrak for literature in the 1980s, an editorial by a well-

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known journalist said it was for a writer, not for a woman writer—it was obviously meant as a compliment. Dhiruben continues to write short stories and novels that explore human relations and social and emotional situations in which her characters—women, children and men—are portrayed with great sensitivity and insight. She has been a consistently brilliant writer but her later works show greater sensitivity to women's reality.

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When did you start writing?

From a very young age, maybe when I was around five. I had started reading and writing early. I noted things in my diary, I used to cut and paste pictures that I liked, then write something next to them.

Do you recall anything you wrote at that age?

When I was a little older, maybe around seven, Gandhiji had been on fast (in Yeravda jail). I wrote about how the day dawned and Gandhiji broke his fast. The whole world was so relieved.

Why this concern for Gandhiji at the age of seven?

In those days (1932–33) the atmosphere was such that there would be a discussion on Gandhiji in every household. My mother, Gangadhar Patel, would take me with her when Gandhiji was staying at Janaki Kutir in Juhu. I met him as a child—he even patted me on the head once.

You once said that you used to write letters to yourself. That is, the young Dhiru used to write to an adult Dhiru. What were those letters about?

I was an avid reader. I would go through books like a bulldozer and feel miserable when I did not have a new book to read. My father had to get me one book a day. Once I went through the eighteen stories of Bijjubhai (Bhijjubhai Badheka was a pioneer in children's literature and pre-school education) and then there was nothing more to read. I used to wonder why writers couldn't write more for children. I felt this especially when I was nine years old and started reading *Saraswati Chandra* (a four-part literary classic written towards the end of the nineteenth century). It was a thick volume so it wouldn't finish quickly but the fourth part of the novel has long paragraphs in Sanskrit and English. I did not know these languages so I was very upset and angry with the author, Govardhan Ram Tripathy. I felt he should have written everything in Gujarati. Why has he written like this? But whether I understood it or not I read on. Often I would neither comprehend much nor enjoy what I did. I used to like Tagore—whatever I read in translation—and Mahadevbhai (Mahadev Desai, Gandhiji's private secretary), I used to read his stories.

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So I would write to the older Dhiru that she should not forget to write for children. Oh yes, somehow I always knew that I was going to be a writer when I grew up. My big worry was what if I, too, become like these writers. What if I forgot myself and did not write for children. So this was a reminder to myself, that the grown up Dhiru not forget children, she must remember how terrible it is not having books to read, she must, must write for small children.

When did you first publish your writing?

Well, when I was about 15 years old I sent off a story to the Diwali issue of *Sandesh*, which was published, and I even got a payment of ten rupees for it. So this can be considered my first published writing. On the other hand, a lot of my essays and short articles were published in the newsletter of *Mumbai Gujarati Hindu Stree Mandal*. My mother was its editor for about 16 years. Whenever she had to fill space she would ask me to give her something from my school essay book or she would tell me about some event and ask me to write about it. These small pieces were published in the newsletter but my mother was sensible—she never put my name down as the writer.

Why not?

She published these pieces under different fictitious names. Sometimes a badly written article was submitted to her and she would say there are too many mistakes in this, you rewrite it. She would get me to do such donkey work but never give me a byline. Once I was very angry and said, "Go away, I am not going to do your work. Even when I write an original piece you don't give me a byline. Shouldn't my name go on it?" At that time she said only two things, "You should not worry about your name—do only your work. If there is power in your pen you will automatically make a name for yourself. Do not keep thinking about your own name and your byline."

Wasn't she herself a writer?

Yes, she had written her autobiography and published a collection of short stories called *Gujaratan Typist ane Bijaa Bato* (Gujarati Woman Typist and Other Stories).

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Please give me a copy of it—her name is not even mentioned among early women writers in Gujarati. . .

I'm not surprised. Actually, she also used to write a column in *Saanj Vartaman.* The Gujarati reformer, Ishwarlal Patel, who wrote *Ishwarno Inkar* used to publish this magazine. My mother wrote for that, too.

Isn't Vadvaanal *your first publication?*

Oh no, the first published work was a play called *Pehlu Inaam,* then a collection of short stories, then a collection of one-act plays, and then *Vadvaanal.*

But Vadvaanal *had a huge impact, didn't it?*

Well, 650 pages—it *was* huge!

Not just in size, it was deeply psychological. How come you didn't write another novel until your novelette in the 1970s ?

After *Vadvaanal* I waited. I felt I should remain at some distance from it. If I wrote immediately I would have written in the same vein—I didn't want a xerox copy of my creation. I had to give myself time to get it out of my system.

Since then you have written mostly novelettes . . .

Some, there are others of about 300 pages too. *Vadvaanal* was exceptionally long because I was totally free then. I had left my job teaching English at Bhavan's College because of too much politicking, and I was translating *Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi* at the rate of five rupees a page. The volume had over 800 pages so I could earn something.

During this time I ran into Krishnaveer Dixit. He invited me to have a cup of tea with him because he wanted to discuss something, and he suggested that I write a novel. I said I don't know how to. He said he was sure I would be able to write one. His brother was the editor of the Gujarati daily, *Mitra,* published from Surat. He said the novel would have to have fifty-two chapters so that it could be serialized for one year. Krishnaveer said, "What you do is, write about three chapters. If my brother likes them we can arrange for him to serialize the novel." I said okay, and then wrote the first chapter and sent if off.

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He liked it and published it immediately. In those days there was nothing like xeroxing. I hadn't even kept a copy nor did I have the time—I was doing my translation work. Only on Thursdays I wrote one chapter.

And after Vadvaanal?

I edited *Sudha* for about ten years in an honorary position.

What were the factors that encouraged to write—besides your own mother?

The social environment in Santa Cruz (Bombay) was very good, there used to be a lot of literary people around. I had an inner need to write, a fondness for writing. By the time I was five I would say I was going to write, and I was going to be a professor. So I would never marry. I did not even know what marriage was then.

Many girls say this as children but you actually did not get married . . .

When I grew up I honestly felt that it was very difficult to be committed to both. It is like trying to play with two balls in two hands at the same time. Your performance should be excellent in whatever you do and that, too, for your own sake. Very few men would be like my father who was exceptionally liberal and believed in individual freedom. He never forced me to work or write or to give up either. I never took up a job again.

Why didn't you write in English? After all, you topped the University in Gujarati as well as in English (and also stood first in inter-arts, breaking a 30 year record in Bombay University where a student choosing logic instead of maths scored the highest). And also did brilliantly in your B.A. and M.A.?

Initially, I wrote mainly in English, short stories, book reviews, etc. Some of that writing might still be in my old files. But later on Bhayani turned my head against it (Hari Vallabh Bhayani, a scholar and critic). I had done my M.A. in English and some light writing in that language, but everybody said I should write in my mother tongue and so that's how I started.

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You have written songs, poems, stories . . . Is there a literary form that you have not used?

Autobiography.

Are you planning to write one?

I am thinking about it. I have written essays but they are not yet published in book form. I have also written radio plays and T.V. serials, one of which is on women's rights.

You have been writing what is called mainstream stuff but you also write on women's issues. Don't you get adverse criticism for that?

They can say what they like, I don't care. In *Kadambarini Maa* the theme is acceptance of the woman who is an individual in her own right. In another story there is the issue of parents refusing to accept a married daughter back.

Did you ever have any problems publishing your writing?

I started my own publishing house where I published works of other people. It was a partnership firm. I translated Mark Twain for young adults.

Did you yourself write and publish humour?

Yes, a lot.

So how come you are not considered a humorist in Gujarati?

God knows. Moreover, people ask why I should write humorous stuff after writing something like *Vadvaanal.* Well, I write what I please and you read it if you want to. It is not as if one has converted to another religion and must be branded as different . . .

What other problems did you face in publishing—why did you close down your publishing house?

We were losing money. We waited till we evened out and then closed down. Distribution is a big problem; it is not the writer or publisher who really earns anything from books—the maximum goes to the booksellers. If they take 50 per cent or more what will others get? And

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only a certain kind of literature sells, all about miracles, superstitions—that sort of thing.

You've never done any religious writing, have you?
Never, I would never write such things. I can do that only if I have my own deep spiritual experience to share with the world. As long as no new truth dawns upon me, how can I write? It would be *chavitasva charvanam* (chewing the chewed). Maybe I write only my *kartik* (humour), but at least I am putting out something that is my very own.

Which book of yours do you like best?
Aagantuk. Also *Vadvaanal.* After I finished writing it I could say to myself, "Not bad, quite good, actually." But *Aagantuk* I liked because in it I've dealt with the concept of the pure human in juxtaposition to the world as it is, and their interaction.

Is there a novel or literary work that you feel you still have to write? A subject or emotional problem that haunts you?
My mind works differently. If I feel strongly about something I begin to write immediately, I don't keep it for later. When I was teaching at Bhavan's College, staff members had to compulsorily attend lectures by K.M. Munshi and others. Once Munshi talked about an old woman he had visited in Switzerland and seen photographs of her children that she kept on her table. I thought: why the pictures, why not the children themselves? I was haunted by the loneliness of this woman and I wrote *Vinashne Panthe* in the next three days. I was consumed by it. I had to go to teach every day and I developed a fever out of sheer exertion.

Tell us how your name was censored out of the film-script of Bhavni Bhavai *in English.*
I have written about it in detail in the preface to my book, *Bhavni Bhavai,* but let me tell you in brief. For two years I was not even aware that such a book had already been published by Seagull, Calcutta. Sureshbhai (Suresh Dalal, poet) telephoned me saying the book was at the Strand bookshop, it was in English, and it did not mention my

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name (all the dialogues and lyrics were mine). So I went to the book-shop but all the copies were sold out. I got one from Sureshbhai's library and went to Ushaben Mehta (late Dr Usha Mehta, well-known Gandhian). I told her about it. She said this cannot happen, Ketan (Ketan Mehta, film director and her nephew) would never do it. "Remain calm. He is going to come in a couple of days and we will ask him to explain," she said. I said, okay, but then Ketan said he didn't know how it had happened. I said, "Since apparently neither of us was aware of how the book got published, let us send them a notice. They must have sold the book internationally and made a lot of money." But Ketan was too busy to see me now. After a while he sent a message, "Let Dhiru Phoi do what she wants."

I was enraged by this response. I met solicitor Jasu Bhai Shah and sent about ten legal notices. It took me six months to complete all this. On top of it all sorts of people would preach to me, saying all this was not appropriate at my age and that I should be praying to god instead. I said this is what god is all about, unveiling the truth is the same as worshipping god. And yes, only at this age can it be done well. Because I am this age I can handle it—a young and upcoming writer might have got scared confronting Ketan Mehta. I strongly felt that even at the risk of being personally cleaned out whatever I have created should survive *in my own name*. This is a writers' issue, not mine alone. It is not even a women's issue, it is a purely a writers' issue.

I registered my work in the copyright office and published it in Gujarati. I released my book at my own expense, hiring the Indian Merchants Chamber Hall. No sponsor—I did not want anyone to sponsor me. Seagull kept selling my book. They sent me three copies after pasting stickers with my name on them. They said according to the agreement with Ketan Mehta they were required to write that it was a film by Ketan Mehta on each page and that Ketan was responsible for that. He had signed an indemnity for that. Actually I had won an award for the dialogues of the film. The HMV disc for the songs of the film also mentioned my name as the lyricist. Even the film credits had shown my name in these sections. The book was in the form of a film-script which the director claimed to be his creation. (Dhiruben said at a public function that if her name had been omitted for this reason, then the director could have published his

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instructions and descriptions without publishing the dialogues and the lyrics, each word of which was written by her.) I had researched this film, I had gone to Baroda for that research and read material on Bhavai and what was called the role of Dheda (a term of contempt for formally untouchable castes.) My mother having been a Gandhian I was interested in Dalit issues. The story of this role in the Bhavai folk form was only one-and-a-half pages in the Baroda library—I worked on it.

Has this been your worst experience of censorship?

This was not just censorship, it was stealing! Something that was stolen and yet accepted as authentic. I had to put up such a fight! Very few writers and members of the Sahitya Parishad supported me. Most would have thought how wonderful it would be if Ketan used their work for one of his films—this film had received international awards, after all.

And yet after all this, an organization in Mumbai asked me to chair a public meeting to felicitate Ketan for his film on Sardar Patel. I agreed! I praised his film, garlanded him and then said, no one person makes a film. It is a collective effort and credit should go to the whole team—the producer, the writer and everyone involved.

I am not bearing a grudge, but when people asked me to forget the whole business I maintained that I was not a saint who could swallow all this and say it was Ketan Mehta's book. I do not have that in me. I really tried hard to compromise. I told him I did not want any monetary compensation, I only wanted him to sign a three-line letter saying that Dhiruben is the author and that his name was printed by mistake. I did not wish to hurt or humiliate him, but I insisted it was my work and he had to publicly acknowledge it. When that did not happen even after a couple of meetings, I sent a copy of the preface to Usha Mehta and Chandrakantbhai (her brother and Ketan's father). The preface mentioned Ketan's name and said that Shampa Banerjee had translated the book into English. She did not even know Gujarati! (the original script and the film are in Gujarati). A young man called Hriday Bani had translated it into Hindi and she used that . . .

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Have any of your submissions ever been rejected by a publisher or editor?

No. I am very lazy. I write and send my work only if somebody asks for it. Earlier my mother did not approve of certain publications. I was very young then. I told her, okay, give me a list of publications you approve of where I should send my stuff.

So everything that you sent got published?

Yes. I write as I wish and file it. I guess I am too lazy to pursue the publishing part. My mother used to criticize me for publishing my writing anywhere and everywhere. So I told her to give me a list . . .

Was Vadvaanal *reviewed?*

A lot. Critical studies were also done on it. On later works, too.

But I find your books have not be reviewed very often over the last few years, although even the snobbiest of critics admit to the originality and high literary merit of your writing.

Maybe earlier critics and litterateurs were chivalrous. What can I say when someone like Dhirubhai (Dhirubhai Thacker, an authority on the history of Gujarati literature) speaks as the president of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad (on the occasion of a review of 20th century Gujarati literature) and fails to mention a single woman writer—what can one say? These days all they do is to barely mention that such and such women have published such and such books, and this or that story is noteworthy. This, too, is done very patronizingly.

When you received the Ranjitram Suvarnachandrak (a very prestigious literary award in Gujarati) the late Harindra Dave (well-known poet and journalist) said in an editorial that this award had gone to a writer and not just a woman writer. There is agreement among all that your work is excellent, so what comes in the way of literary reviews?

My PR is lacking! I enjoy writing and I am very satisfied after I have written something. It may not be published—although of course it feels very good when it is read.

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Do your stories appear in textbooks?
Yes. They are also selected for research work.

Have you had any other problems vis-a-vis your writing ?
People do not take writers seriously. If I am frying puris in the kitchen that is considered work, but if I am busy writing and don't step out to talk to people it is considered to be unforgiveably rude.

Cultural activities were taken seriously in the Gandhian era though he himself was not connected with them. Now values have changed. People say, oh you are a writer? How much have you published? How much money do you make? Has your book been made into a serial? Is it on TV? Once your work appears on TV and in films you become great! No one cares to read and appreciate what one writes, and that hurts me. The general belief is that if it translates into money then it must be good.

Yesterday someone came to me with an offer of three lakh rupees. He wanted me to write 200 episodes for a TV serial from one of my own novels. I had to refuse reluctantly, because I have no time. I do not like to chew the already chewed even if it is my own work. If I agree to write 200 episodes I will not be able to do anything else, it will not allow me to live as I want to, plan my day as I wish. And I could never allow that. If I was going to accept this kind of thing I would never have left the security of the teaching job at Bhavan's College. Life is more important than offers like this and what they signify. It's quite okay if I don't do anything else, okay if I don't write four more books. I want to preserve the 'Me' that is inside me.

Interviewed by Sonal Shukla

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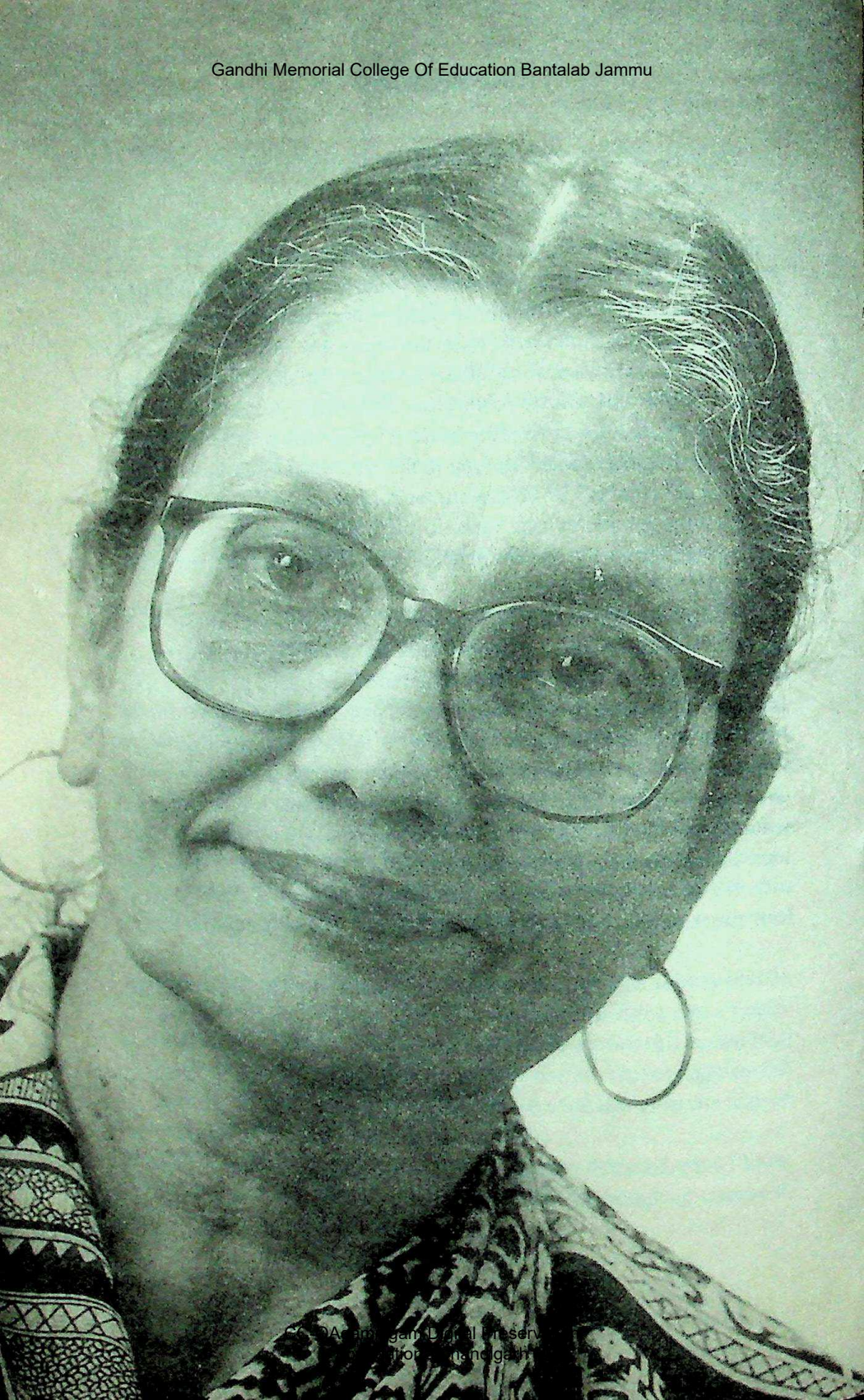

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Sara Aboobacker

SARA ABOOBACKER (b. 1936), one of the most prominent women writers of contemporary Kannada literature, was born in Chamanadu village of Kasargod district in Kerala. Although she belongs to an orthodox Malayali Muslim community, Sara was able to complete high school because her own family was progressive. Her education provided the take-off point for her literary career at a later stage. Soon after graduating from school she was married to an engineer in Mangalore and moved to that coastal city in the South Canara district of Karnataka. The change in location had a great impact on Sara's life because the culture and lifestyle of Muslims in Kasargod and Mangalore differed considerably.

Although her mother tongue is Malayalam, Sara chose to write in Kannada. Even though she moved to Mangalore in the 1950s, she began her literary career only in the 1980s. The Bandaya and Dalit movements in Kannada literature, which came to the fore in the '80s, created a conducive environment that enabled her to become a prominent voice from the margins as a Muslim woman writing during that period. She is the author of many short stories, novels and critical essays, as well as a travelogue. She has also translated three works from Malayalam into Kannada.

However, Sara's main contribution to Kannada literature has been as a novelist. Her first novel, *Chandragiriya Teeradalli,*

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was published in 1984 and she has subsequently written six novels, in addition to four collections of short stories. Her works deal with the complexities of life in middle and lower middle class Muslim families in coastal Karnataka. In her fiction, she reveals the manner in which poverty, illiteracy, religious superstitions and patriarchal values have created unbearable suffering for Muslim women. In particular she portrays the problems caused by practices like dowry, polygamy and instant divorce (talaq), which are endemic among Malayali Muslims.

The lively and intense social and political consciousness she brings to her work is another important characteristic of Sara's writing. In fact, she first become known as a writer thanks to her rebellion against gender inequality and religious fundamentalism, an attitude that she retains even today despite sustained attempts by fundamentalist groups to silence her.

Sara has been recognised for her literary achievements with a number of awards and honours. The most prestigious of these is the Danachintamani Attimabbe Prashasti presented to her by the government of Karnataka in 2002. Among her other awards the most important are the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award (1991), the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award (1995) and the Anupama Niranjana Book Award (1995).

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When did you first experience gender inequality, and in what way?
I have felt the pinch of gender inequality right from my childhood. As the only girl between three older brothers and two younger ones I was the most sought-after child at home, but I realised at an early age that the boys enjoyed more liberties than I did. Of course, my parents sent me to school but school picnics, school functions, movies and even acting in plays with an all-female cast were taboo. In those days, when Muslim girls rarely went to school, school-going itself was seen as a privilege granted to me. I was allowed to study up to SSLC so I don't blame my parents for the restrictions imposed on me. In fact, sometimes I myself would feel like staying away from school.

Why was this?
On my way to school, people of the community would stare at me in such a way that I would feel embarrassed. It was very hard for them to accept that I was going to school and that, too, without a veil covering my head. I refused to cover my head because no other girl in the school did so, but the Muslims in the area couldn't bear it.

Did you ever feel embarrassed in the school because you were a Muslim girl?
No, never. In the school I never felt that I was different because I was Muslim.

You have said that you were inclined towards reading and writing from childhood, yet you actually started creative writing only at the age of 43. Why was there such a wide gap?
I personally think that it is better to write after 40. By then you are mature enough to write and your experiences are rich and varied. In any case I believe that one should read a lot before venturing into writing.

What exactly were the reasons for the late start to your career as a writer? Was it because you didn't have enough experience of life or that you thought your experiences were not good enough? Or were

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there external hurdles that prevented you from writing despite your inner zeal?

I was married in 1953, soon after the school-leaving exams. The atmosphere in my in-laws' house was very different from what it was at my parents' house. In my birthplace I didn't face any restrictions in mobility, but here no woman was allowed to even go into the courtyard when the men of the family were around. You may not have heard of such practices, but the fact is that even our own brothers-in-law were outsiders for us.

Nava Bharata was the only newspaper the family subscribed to, and only men used to read it. It would be almost 11 o' clock by the time I got to read pieces of it—I seldom saw the newspaper in its complete form. This is just one example to illustrate the kind of situation I encountered in my in-laws' house.

Once the Kamala Circus Company had camped very near our house. It was so close that we could hear the noise from the show at home. People from distant places used to visit the circus. Men and women from my hometown also visited it. The men of our family had the privilege of enjoying the circus but not the womenfolk—we were not even allowed to go and see the animals.

My first son was born in 1955, two years after I got married. Other children followed subsequently and much of my time was spent in bringing them up. The initial phase of adjustment to the different situation I encountered in my in-laws' house and, later, the responsibility of bringing up my children left little time for me to think about writing. Nevertheless I did make several attempts at writing and even sent some of my pieces for publication. They never got published. Had those first attempts been successful, maybe I would have started writing seriously much earlier.

So you started writing much before you began contributing to the tabloid, Lankesh Patrike. *Which journals did you send your early writings to?*

I first wrote in 1968, mainly short stories. I remember sending them to *Nava Bharata*, a daily, and *Sudha*, a weekly, but I didn't continue writing because I received no reply at all from them.

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Do you think this happened because you were a Muslim or because you were a woman? Or was there some other reason for their lack of interest?

Initially, I thought both my community and my gender played a role in my works not getting published, but other writers of my community like Boluvar Mohammed Kunhi, Fakhir Mohammed Katpadi and Mumtaaz were established writers by then. I do not really understand why my stories were not published. I did not put much effort into getting them published, maybe they would have been if I had tried harder. Anyway, since they weren't I would just read my stories to my little children and throw them into the waste-paper basket afterwards.

I was a regular reader of *Lankesh Patrike* from the time it was launched. When Lankesh* wrote a piece on the need for unity among Dalits and Muslims entitled, "My People Should Unite," I was greatly impressed and reacted immediately. My reaction was published in the very next issue. My next piece supporting the Muslim woman, Nazma Bhangi of Bijapur, who was facing social boycott because she defied the fatwa that Muslim women should not go to cinema halls, was also published immediately in *Lankesh Patrike*. It was then that Lankesh suggested that I write a novel on the lives of Muslim women. This led to my first novel, *Chandragiriya Teeradalli* (On the Banks of the River Chandragiri). I wrote it in eight days. This is how Lankesh and *Lankesh Patrike* played an important role in my literary life.

Women tend to censor their writing in various ways. Some may not even be aware of such censorship, internal or external; others believe it is necessary for the sake of the family. In certain instances the family directly or indirectly imposes censorship, in other cases

* P. Lankesh was a major figure in Kannada literature and the cultural life of Karnataka. A novelist, short story writer and a playwright, he directed several feature films, and many of his own stories have been made into films. He was instrumental in introducing new voices to Kannada literature through his tabloid, *Lankesh Patrike*, which he started 22 years ago. *Lankesh Patrike* has consistently provided space for secular and progressive voices in Karnataka.

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society acts as a censor. What kind of censorship has affected you the most?

So far I have not experienced any censorship—I have always said everything that I wanted to. I have never been afraid of the reactions of my husband or other family members. Of course, Muslim fundamentalists have strongly opposed my writings because I have dealt with the injustices meted out to Muslim women in the name of religion. They have tried in many ways to stop me writing and the Puttur incident was one such instance.

My writings deal predominantly with issues like polygamy and the talaq system which create hell for Muslim women. My first novel, *Chandragiriya Teeradalli*, throws light on the heinous system of talaq and reconciliation. Under that system, if the husband utters talaq thrice in succession, he and his wife become total strangers to each other; if they ever want to reunite, the wife must marry another man for at least a day and spend at least one night with him before being reunited with her original husband. When I tried to write and speak about such inhuman and meaningless practices, the fundamentalists saw me as a threat. They called me names and argued that such practices did not exist in the community; they even accused me of writing such things in pursuit of fame and money. Some tried to justify the procedure for reconciliation as a form of punishment for the husband, but nobody ever seemed to think about what the woman has to go through as a result of such customs.

My second novel deals with polygamy. Here the protagonist suffers from a prolonged ailment and her husband decides to go in for a second marriage. The protagonist opposes this and asks what would have happened if *he* had been bedridden and she had intended to remarry. It was very difficult for blind followers of religion to accept such questioning of age-old practices which had kept women in their control for such a long time.

After the publication of these two novels I was invited to participate in a seminar in Puttur. My opponents tried to physically assault me at the event, and after that Muslim fundamentalists continued to seek revenge against me through their publications. They tried to expel me from the community. They prevented harassed and suffering Muslim women from meeting me and they depicted me as a religious

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traitor. They just didn't want the filth of the community to be publicised. Their reaction was akin to throwing away the mirror when the mirror merely reflects an ugly face. Those men declared war on me and published vindictive articles about me in their journals. I filed a defamation suit against them.

What was the outcome of the case?
I won it!

How did your family members react to the situation?
They have always stood by me. As soon as he learnt about the Puttur incident my younger brother came and comforted me. He said the event just meant negative publicity for those people and that I shouldn't fear them, but my husband was worried.

Did any of your family members try to stop you from writing because of these attacks?
No, they did not. Indeed I have continued to write about such inhuman religious practices to this day.

Didn't you face any hindrance from the family when you decided to fight against religious fundamentalists?
No, no. In fact, at the time the fundamentalists decided to ban me from the community I was observing four months iddat following my husband's death. It was my brother-in-law (husband's brother) who brought the news of the threatened expulsion to my notice, and it was he who gave me the idea of filing a case against those people. A copy of the letter he sent to me played an important role as evidence in court. I filed the case in consultation with my father. My family members have always stood by at such times.

From whom did you receive encouragement in your writing?
My father and my younger brother have always encouraged my writing. They have also shaped my social and political consciousness and encouraged me to think independently. For instance, somebody once approached my father with the complaint that I was misrepresenting our religion in my works. My father replied, "Who can say what is

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right and what is wrong with regard to religion? I have been reading all that she has written and have not come across anything that goes against our religion." My father was a very broad-minded person and as a result I, too, was able to develop a secular outlook. All my children and daughters-in-law agree with my attitudes and they are with me in my fight for women's equality. Another important person was my elder brother, he also played a major role in my life. He was instrumental in educating me.

Do your family members read your works?

I don't think any member of my marital family has read my writings so far. My husband never had an interest in literature, even my sons never developed such an interest, but all my daughters-in-law have read my first novel. And I used to orally convey the gist of whatever I wrote to my husband.

Do you see this as providing you with the freedom to write whatever you wanted?

I don't think so. My writing would not have been different even if they had read it.

Your mother-tongue is Malayalam but your language of expression is Kannada. Was this a deliberate choice? Are you comfortable with having opted for Kannada?

I did not consciously choose to write in Kannada. Although my mother-tongue is Malayalam, I learnt to read and write in Kannada because I was educated in a Kannada-medium school. My father was concerned about his children's education but he was not too particular that we should study in our mother-tongue! I, too, have never felt that I should have been educated in Malayalam or that I should have written in it. Language was never a problem when I attempted to write. I have never thought that I could have written better if my language at school had been Malayalam.

There are a number of Muslims in Karnataka. The problems I depict in my work are problems affecting Muslim societies everywhere. It is true that in Karnataka there are many more Kannadigas than there are Kannada-speaking Muslims, but is it necessary that a creat-

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ive work be read only by people of a particular community or religion? Isn't literature a medium through which humanity can be united? I personally feel that caste, religion and language should not create divisions amongst us. I have never felt that I have lost anything because I write in Kannada.

As a Malayali Muslim woman living in Karnataka and writing in Kannada, how do you deal with the different aspects of your identity? Which identity provides you with the most sustenance—as a human being and as a writer?

I have been one among the people of my adopted home. I have never felt discriminated against as an outsider by the Kannada literary world. I must say that the people of Karnataka have been very accommodating in this respect. However, this does not mean that I have rejected Malayalam or that I am not a Malayali. I have translated three Malayalam works into Kannada, so I would like to identify myself with both Kannadigas and Malayalis. If Kerala is my natal home, Karnataka is my marital home.

There are very few writers from the Muslim community and women writers are even more of a rarity. In fact many Muslim writers who appear to be very progressive in their work are not so in actuality. I felt a little unhappy when I realised that my thoughts and attitudes are mine alone, and that there are few like-minded people within my community to keep me company. However, this did not mean that I would go back on my commitments. Later on I met Sayyad Bhai from Pune and felt happy and confident that there was at least one like-minded thinker within the community!

Is it possible that you may not have faced the protests against your writing if you had remained in Kerala and written in Malayalam?

Following the rise of fundamentalism and communalism most women writers today experience similar attacks and protests. If I had begun writing 25 years ago I don't think I would have faced such a situation.

Had I remained in Kerala after marriage, I am sure to have begun writing much earlier because Kerala was not as conservative as Mangalore in those days. We definitely didn't have so many religious practices that bound a woman to the house and there was no practice

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of burqa. I would have had the best environment for my studies and writing, and if I had written in Malayalam my caste and religion would not have mattered much. Under the circumstances, I think the language I chose to write in and the fact that I was married into Kannada-land have proven to be something of a hindrance to me as a writer.

Can you elaborate on the rise of fundamentalism and communalism in the country and their impact on women, including women writers?

I think fundamentalism and communalism have increased over the past three decades. Till the 1970s there was no burqa problem in Kerala—in fact, Keralites who went on Haj in the 1950s told us that *ghosha*[*] was not practised and burqa was not compulsory even in Arabia then. It was only after the discovery of oil in Arabia that women were forced to observe these practices. As wealth from there began to flow here, a number of religious groups were born and these groups started glorifying religion through the mass media. As a result it became almost impossible to comment on the Prophet or question any religious traditions. Many more restrictions were imposed on women. For instance, in the 1950s, there was not a single burqa-clad woman in Kasargod but by the 1990s it was impossible for any Muslim woman to go out without wearing one. Families that once used to encourage women's education today behave as if women don't need to be educated at all. I continue to be puzzled about how even educated women have turned into fundamentalists. Probably Hindu fundamentalism has been aggravated by this sort of Muslim fundamentalism. Another reason could be political power-mongering and vote-bank politics.

Your works give the impression that your family life has been most satisfactory. There is no indication of any personal pain or loss in

[*] *Ghosha* is a system of restrictions imposed on women which includes veiling, controlling mobility and so on.

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your writings—all your works have dealt with the problems of women who do not belong to your class. What do you have to say about this?

I wouldn't say mine has been a satisfying life, but so far I have not written about what I have gone through in my life.

Why have you been focussing on certain issues which are not really part of your personal experience?

All I can say is that such a sequence has not come into my novels so far. I do not want to force my personal experiences into my writing when there is no relation to them within the story.

Wouldn't you agree that this might be a form of self-censorship?

I don't agree that I am censoring myself. I am looking at the plight of women in poor Muslim families; the issues of polygamy and talaq have so far not bothered my family.

Aren't there any complexities in upper middle class Muslim families like yours? Why haven't you dealt with any of them?

I have thought about this matter—I may actually put them into my autobiography.

Are there any important issues that you haven't been able to write about in your literary work?

I have not been able to take up the issue of prostitution and the various facets of a working woman's life, especially the problems faced by them that are particular to their sex. This may be due to my lack of experience and exposure.

In your autobiographical piece that has been published you have expressed resentment about burqa and dowry. What was that about?

Dowry has created some minor problems in my life, too. Many a proposal failed because of hefty demands. In this marriage, too, dowry played a role—my maternal uncle was a wealthy man and my in-laws presumed that our family was also rich and that I would bring lots of money and gold as dowry. Since these hopes were not realised my

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husband would taunt me about it till the end. Of course, no women members of the family ever raised this issue with me—I think other men of the family were provoking my husband.

In what circumstances would your husband taunt you about dowry? Was it during times of economic crisis?

We never faced an economic crisis as such. He was an engineer and I was not a spendthrift. I think instigation by other male members was the main reason for my husband's comments on this subject. The taunts became worse when I expressed my desire to have a house of our own. When his nasty remarks about dowry reached my parents, my father sold a piece of land that was in my name and gave us Rs. 20,000 to buy a plot and another Rs. 15,000 for the construction of the house. My father even got some gold ornaments made to save me from my husband's verbal battering. In those days gold did not form part of the dowry in Kerala—despite this my parents had given me gold jewellery amounting to 180 gms. I hadn't pierced my ears like other Muslim girls; to compensate for the *alikats*[*] my parents had given me gold chains at the time of marriage.

You have said that your dreams were never realised even though you married an educated man. Now, in our conversation, you mention that your husband changed for the better in the course of time. Could you elaborate on this?

I believed that an educated husband would not be a fundamentalist and that I would not be forced to observe *ghosha*, but I ended up wearing a burqa the very next day after my wedding. I have already narrated the horrors of *ghosha*, which was observed in their house—there was no access to the outside world, young girls of ten and twelve years would have to hide themselves when visitors came, even if they

[*] *Alikats* are ornaments, normally in the form of rings, worn on the edge of the ear from top to bottom. Among Malayali Muslims *alikats* are an integral part of a married woman's jewellery, equivalent to the *thali* or *mangala sutra* of Hindus. The number and the design of *alikats* given to the bride are a measure of the family's status, but the practice of wearing *alikats* is less common now.

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were female. Can you believe that there was a room meant for that very purpose?

Being at home literally meant being jailed in the house. I used to get so bored. There were no books or journals to read, you couldn't go to see a film, you couldn't even step out of the house. The men had their share of entertainment. I questioned my husband about this. "If I am not allowed to watch movies you should not, either. I need entertainment just like you. If you block my access to it I will not let you have it," I argued. Although my husband would sympathise he was afraid to go against family norms, so he started restricting himself instead.

I was getting restless in Mangalore. I started pleading with him to opt for a transfer so that we could move out. I realised he would change for the better if we got out of that joint family situation, and I was right. He changed a lot in the years that followed.

I had a similar experience with burqa. I found out for myself that once you get into it there is no easy way of coming out of it. I was able to get rid of it only after my husband got a transfer and we moved out.

How did you express your dislike of the burqa system?

Where did I have the opportunity to express my distaste? Maybe I would have hit back if the womenfolk had forced burqa onto me, but they were all very innocent. Not only I, every woman in the house wore burqa.

Why haven't your works depicted these kinds of problems experienced by educated, progressive women? Are they unimportant?

It is not that they are less important, it is just that somehow no work of mine has had a character of that kind. I don't quite know why. It is not a conscious omission, it's just happened that way, but I want to write about all that now. I had always believed that I should first write about the issues of dowry, talaq and polygamy, that may be the reason for my leaving out my personal experiences from my writings so far. I have never made a conscious decision to keep my life out of my writings.

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I have rarely seen women writers with the kind of political consciousness that you have developed. How was this possible in your case and who contributed to your evolution in this direction?

It's true, I, too, feel that women writers in Kannada are not sufficiently politically conscious, or it may be that they are not expressing their thoughts on these matters often enough. If women writers were more politically conscious, our political system would have been much better than it is now.

My father was instrumental in developing my social and political consciousness. He subscribed to quite a few journals—we were getting *Life* magazine, *Time* magazine, *Readers' Digest*, *Coronet*, etc., at home. Dailies would come a day late by train from Madras. My father didn't miss reading a single day's newspaper. I have the same habit even today—my day cannot progress without my reading the newspaper in the morning. Everyone at home was highly politically conscious. I call this the boon of literacy in Kerala. I haven't found that kind of awareness in anybody in my in-laws' family.

You immediately react to all kinds of current developments, whether national or international, and you often refer to them in your conversations. With whom have you been sharing these thoughts at home?

With no one. I had absolutely no one to share my thoughts with in the early years of marriage. Now that I move around freely and interact with people I have friends to share these thoughts with.

Why didn't you join a political movement as an extension of your political awareness? Was it because of your family situation?

I never looked for a political platform because I could hardly come out of the house. If I had had an opportunity to pursue such a path maybe my life would have been different today.

There are a number of highly politically active women writers in Indian literature, like Mahasweta Devi and Volga. Do you regret not being like them?

I do feel I could have been like one of them, but now it is too late. Now it is only writing that I can concentrate on. If I had had the

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liberty that I now enjoy when I got married I could probably have done something more meaningful. But I was not so fortunate.

Your autobiography, Muslim Hudugi Shaale Kalithaddu *(A Muslim Girl's Schooling) records only your childhood. Aren't you keen on writing about the later part of your life?*

I am, but I am finding it difficult to write the later part of my autobiography. I feel the time is not yet ripe, I think I should wait another ten years to write my complete autobiography. If I attempt to write it now I am afraid I may hurt some people, yet I can't leave them out. It is a question of maintaining relationships. Maybe all of them will be much more mature in another ten years and will not find my revelations objectionable.

Is your gender an obstacle to penning your autobiography?

Not really. But still we women cannot write like men, without giving a thought to the after-effects. I don't know why only women are so hesitant. But still . . . we women . . . we are more kind-hearted, you see, we try to avoid hurting others.

This kind-heartedness can also become a scale by which to gauge women's writing. Anyway, are you worried that your autobiography may bring the ideological differences between you and your relatives into the public sphere?

It is not a question of ideological differences, it is about the common selfishness and other such features that every family has.

One last question about your writing. The protagonist in Chandragiriya Teeradalli *chooses the mosque pond to commit suicide in. Was this based on a true story, was it something you consciously chose to include or was it instinctive?*

That part of the story was not based on a true incident. Until now, as far as I know, no one has chosen a mosque pond as a suicide site. It was a deliberate choice. This part really touched me as I was writing. When the woman is not at all at fault, why should she be punished with meaningless practices? When I wrote this novel I had crossed 40—if I were younger I don't think the ending would have been the

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same. Maybe I wouldn't even have let her die, or maybe I would have let her accept the practice of 'reconciliation', I don't know what I would have done. But the story itself was based on a true incident that took place when I was in the 10th class. The girl was about my age, her mother was working as a maid in our house. Her tragedy haunted me. Since then I have witnessed many such instances of harassment meted out to Muslim women. I feel the age factor brings maturity with it, I think my observations and experiences contributed to the ending chosen for the story.

Have any of your works been translated?

Chandragiriya Teeradalli has been translated into English, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi and Marathi. *Vajragalu* and *Suliyalli Sikkavaru* have been translated into Malayalam, and some short stories have been translated into English, Malayalam and Telugu.

Interviewed by Sabiha Bhoomigowda

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Bama

PUBLISHED IN 1992 Bama's (b. 1961) *Karukku* was a major milestone; for the first time in the history of Tamil literature a Dalit woman was speaking in her own voice about the experience of being Dalit. The first text to explore the connections between caste, religion and Tamil identity, *Karukku* drew a range of reactions from Tamil literary circles. It received accolades as well as caustic criticism, was dismissed as mere reportage as well as hailed as a literary landmark. Her *Sangati* (1994) deals with the strategies of resistance used by Dalit women, and *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) presents vignettes of the lives of Dalit men and women. Her latest novel, *Vanmam*, is in press. *Karukku* won the Crossword Award for the best translated text in 2000, and is also being translated into French.

Bama draws her energy from the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, and her writing is a source of strength to the growing Dalit consciousness there.

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What are the circumstances which made you a writer?

I did not come into writing with any great dream of becoming a writer or anything like that. I did not attempt serious writing in my student days, though I was exposed to a good deal of literature in Tamil, thanks to my elder brother, Raj Gouthaman. I had done the usual sort of scribblings in poetry and the like in college... It was in 1992... when I came out of the religious order... that I started writing *Karukku* for my own consolation. I had no job, I had left the convent, I couldn't go back to my village. I was employed as a teacher before I went into the religious order and was comfortable, economically, but I had nothing to fall back on. It was a very hard time for me. Also, convent life of almost seven years had moulded me in specific ways—I couldn't fit in with life outside easily. It was all too heady for me and I felt a misfit, belonging neither here nor there.

Everything seemed stagnant... in stasis. Obviously, I didn't have a glorious past to fall back on, nor did the present hold any meaning —and the future held nothing in store. It was then that my memories swept me back to my childhood... perhaps it was my subconscious.

What made you leave the convent?

I was born a Christian and all through my life I was in Christian schools, colleges, institutions. In 1985 I joined the convent in Chennai, had three years training as a nun—I thought if I became a nun I could help young Dalit girls to get an education. In our community people don't think like that. I was in the convent for four years and for the first three years was in an elite school with children who were very rich—but I wasn't happy there.

I taught Maths. When I teach I always try to link what I'm teaching to society—so I was teaching simple interest and compound interest, and I gave them the example of poor people who go to moneylenders and are fleeced by them. Well, the parents of the children complained about me and I was reprimanded. I was very upset. What I really minded was that I had no contact with real people in that school, it was all false, insincere, a real cultural contradiction for me. The wealth of the place really nauseated me. I wanted to be transferred to a village school but they refused—they wanted the benefit of my experience. I'm a very good teacher. "You have taken the vow

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of obedience," they said to me "you have to obey." But that really annoyed me, because I'm not a slave.

They sent me to Jammu. I was in Jammu, had been there for five months, but I knew I couldn't stay there any longer. And they really mistreated me. What they did, they came to New Delhi Railway Station when I reached there—I was really broken, and in this condition they made me sign away all my dues, everything that was due to me as a teacher, they made me sign it away. But I was so disgusted that I signed any piece of paper they put in front of me.

Did your family support you when you left the convent?

My parents were opposed to my entering the convent—they advised me to continue as a teacher even if I chose not to get married. But coming out of the convent, it's like a bad omen . . . something that should never occur, so I didn't feel like going back to our village. I stayed somewhere else. But my mind travelled back in a flashback . . . we were not wealthy or economically well-off, but life was free . . . I felt like a sparrow. Now I was totally lost, a fish out of water. I found a job in a Jesuit organisation and used to weep my heart out to Father Marg. I didn't feel like moving about freely in the world because I was self-conscious even while travelling in a bus. In fact I say in *Karukku*, at the end, that I felt like a bird with its wings clipped. It was Father Marg who asked me to write my thoughts and feelings . . . not like a story or anything, just to get a sense of relief. Since I didn't really plan a book, I just kept on writing as it came—my convent experience, my happy childhood, my people in the village . . . no particular order or structure, it was all mixed up. But I felt greatly relieved.

That's when I realised that these intervening seven years had been just an illusion. What was important was my life at home, in my village. I felt that I belonged there, that was the real me, my real self—my knowing who I was.

Actually when I read it again I would laugh, and sometimes I cried. Then I gave it to others to read. A few enjoyed it, others were surprised that such things really happened. That was when Marg suggested I publish it. My immediate reaction was negative. It was not only my life-story, I had mentioned so many people in my life in it.

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But everyone encouraged me and said that it was very new, so I had to give in.

Originally I used my own informal language in the sections describing my village life, while the sections about convent life were in a more "written" style. Afterwards I changed the whole text to a conversational style, divided it into chapters . . .

What was the response to Karukku *once it was published?*
I wasn't actually bothered about how it would be received as a literary text, wasn't aware of that dimension at all. I thought my people would be happy with the book. To my surprise, they felt that I had given out their secrets, like their pet names, etc., and they actually attacked my father—because I was living somewhere else. I was just coming to terms with my Appa when this came up so he wrote to me saying, "Don't you dare come here, you'll be attacked."

I couldn't understand his reaction at all. Luckily there were some young people in the village who reassured me, saying that people were reacting without understanding the book properly. Most of them couldn't read on their own and had gone by reports given to them by others. So, these young people in the village read the novel aloud by streetlight, chapter by chapter, to the village public. Then they all understood it and were reassured—they invited me to the village and called me "Karukku Bama".

In literary circles there were some who discounted it as not being literary enough . . . not keeping to the generic definitions of novel or autobiography. Some of them were upset by the obscenities used and found them un-parliamentary! But there were also those who welcomed it as new and experimental. But all this didn't affect me, actually, because I never wanted to create great literature or anything. Once they commented on the language and called it vulgar and obscene, I was all the more convinced that it was *my* language, our language. If you can accept all other kinds of dialect, why not this? This is our way of expression. If they hadn't dwelt on it so much, perhaps I wouldn't have become so conscious of this aspect of my identity. Now I wanted to stick to it. What came to me naturally I retained as my language, my own.

I was very moved by the small felicitation arranged by Kural

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organisation in Pondy. It was low-key, informal, and I cherish that experience even today. It was the first time that I was recognised as a writer.

Though you say that Karukku *was liberating, you are only a minor thread in its structure . . .*

True. How can I think of my life as one individual's? I am a Dalit and a woman . . . therefore it is my community which makes me what I am. Whether you like it or not your identity cannot be separated from your caste in Tamil Nadu—or anywhere in India. It is there in every aspect of our life . . . when you go looking for a house to rent, or a job . . . whatever! The moment anyone starts talking to you they know your town or village, the street you live on . . . which actually is a clue to your caste. This is true for everyone so it is not just my story. In that sense I don't have a story of my own, my story is my community's story. All that I am, my beliefs, spirituality, language, culture . . . are all what the community provided. I can't isolate myself and talk about my birth, my family, etc.

Tell us about Sangati . . .

Karukku had so many threads . . . so someone said, why don't you write about Dalit women in particular. *Sangati* was written with that in mind. It was intended as a novel, but even in this there is nothing purely imaginary. I drew from the experiences of women I knew, I selected the persona and incidents. Though I had lived with them I discovered, as if for the first time, that many of the women had achieved so much in such difficult situations and they had so much to offer. They had survived a great deal of hardship, faced poverty, caste atrocities and untold misery. But brushing all that aside, they had gone on with life. Even I don't have that kind of courage.

The grandmother in Sangati. . .?

Velliamma . . . she was my maternal grandmother. She seems like such an ordinary old woman—but she had faced everything in life. Widowed at a young age, she brought up her two daughters by herself. She faced caste discrimination, even her notion of religion is very pragmatic. In every sense she has a singular strength and energy.

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Her language . . . never distraught or weighed down; she mimics the landlords and laughs at what they do! She can literally talk about anything under the sun, she has a story or an incident for every occasion. She knows the story of the *Ramayana*—I don't know where she got it from but I even remember her discussing Kannagi's foolishness with my brother. She always believed that a woman should stand on her own feet, no point licking the feet of the man. She participated in village debates and cases, said whatever she felt. And she was a good administrator—employed people from different streets, got the work done and saw to it that they got paid. Her practical wisdom was based on experience.

You've touched on a lot of issues concerning women in Sangati . . . . . And ways by which women cope with them, the strategies they use to tackle issues. . .

Rakkamma, for example, in the novel, will start crying loudly even before the man begins to attack her. Immediately the villagers gather around and intervene. That was her way of avoiding a beating ... Another one would start hurling abuses and men would feel ashamed. I've also written about a woman who lifts up her sari and says that if she hadn't done so he would have thrashed her—that was *her* strategy for escape.

Would you say that you focus on the specific strategies of Dalit women in very oppressive conditions?

I really feel that I should underline their resistance rather than their victimhood . . . you know, they can achieve so much by *naiyandi* (ironic parody and satire), like the young man in *Annachi* who accomplished his mission by addressing the upper caste man as *annachi* (elder brother). That's why these women have no inhibitions about shouting or using bad words which may seem indecent to middle class sensibilities. In reality these are their outlets, they let their anger out of their system and retain their sanity. They can contain neither their happiness nor their sorrow—once they let off steam they are calm. My life has been different even though I am a Dalit by birth so, actually, these women give me the courage to regain myself.

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In Sangati, *Bama is the narrator as well as a character . . .*
Bama the character is an interactive narrator, she asks her grandmother questions about various issues, shares her doubts and concerns, it is through her that you get to know Velliamma better . . . you learn that you can live through this crisis without losing your selfhood. Before I began writing *Sangati* I hadn't realised the value of all these women's lives, especially Velliamma's—she was just there! But now, when I consciously construct her character she becomes a reservoir of strength and energy. Now, in my life as a single woman, I see her as a role-model. It makes me live my life meaningfully.

But Bama in Sangati *is unobtrusive . . .*
Yes. In *Karukku* it was me, but I can't even begin to enter the experiences of the women in *Sangati.* Though I'm a Dalit woman, to be honest I'm nowhere near them.

Tell us about your short stories . . .
I never really wanted to write short stories but when requests came, I attempted them. After *Karukku,* Vaasanthi asked me to give her a story for *India Today.* I had never thought of the media before, but I had just come back from home where I had heard the story of Annachi . . . so I just wrote that incident down with very minor changes. It was well received and I gained confidence, I even read it out to its real-life hero! After that all sorts of people started telling me stories, asking me to write them. Some other stories have stayed with me right from childhood, they have remained inside and surfaced, as from a bank account, when I wanted. Most of my stories are about my native place, but recently I have written a few set in other contexts. The main reservoir is still my village.

How do you react to people's comments . . . do you change or rewrite?
People have sometimes commented on the beginning or end of a short story—even Raj Gouthaman did that in the preface to *Kisumbukkaran*—but I don't share my stories before they go to print. Anyway, I hardly have stories to send on demand! I write only when asked

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. . . (*Laughs*) Sometimes, if there is time, I send a story to Father Marg. I remember he made a few suggestions about the conclusion but I didn't agree—I'm very clear about how I want my stories to end.

What about content . . .

I'm very sure about the content, too, but I take comments on form seriously. Anyway, my short stories . . . I don't show them to many. Novels, I share with friends, I sit on them for many years. There are comments about my use of words—don't use abusive words—but I find it difficult to take them seriously. I feel I know how to present the content—if you feel uneasy, maybe you should skip those sections and read on.

Who are the writers who have inspired you?

I've read quite a lot. Jeyakanthan has inspired me . . . I don't know these writers, I only know them through their writings. When I read Ambai's " Veetin Moolaiyil", it was very different from other kinds of writing. I asked my brother about her and then he gave me her other stories to read.

Apart from you and Gouthaman, is there anyone else in your family who is interested in literature . . .

My younger brother. My recent work, *Vanmam* owes a lot to his insights. He was part of that struggle, but he is very sceptical about my writing!

After Karukku *was translated you must have received comments from different quarters . . .*

In English it has been very highly commended. Maybe it's just very new, but now I'm seeing a much wider audience for my people and their experience. A lot of Tamil groups and people began talking about *Karukku* after the Crossword award. It had been available in Tamil even before that, but it wasn't acknowledged then; people are interested in it now but I see that as acknowledging the award, not the work. For me, recognition in my own village as one who voices their experiences is what matters most.

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With your teaching job, various public activities in Dalit fora and managing your household on your own, how do you find the space and time for writing?

Only beginning it is a problem; once I start it continues full swing. I go on for hours, well into the night. Sometimes I wonder about neighbours noticing the light burning till late hours . . .

Is there anything that you feel you cannot write about?

My younger sister had a love marriage—an inter-Dalit marriage, and it proved to be fatal. I have begun writing her story many times, there are so many diaries I start it in . . . but I can't continue. It is not yet time. Other than that, I don't feel the need to hold back anything for anyone's sake.

Where would you place your writing in the context of the Dalit movement and Dalit consciousness?

I feel my writing has a definite social function. Being part of the various activities of the Dalit movement, I realise the need for more and more writing and also feel inspired to write. There are lots of young people who are writing today, but the number of women remains abysmally low.

Interviewed by Mangai

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Mangala Godbole

MANGALA GODBOLE (b. 1952) has been writing for over 25 years. She wrote her first article soon after her marriage and sent it to *Stree*—the only feminist magazine in Marathi those days—which published it immediately. She continued to write extensively on women's issues for the magazine and ultimately joined its editorial team in the 1980s. It was here that she accidentally ventured into writing a humour column, which she continued for 10 years. The column met with astounding success and humour became her chosen genre. Today, Mangala Godbole is the only woman humorist of eminence in the Marathi literary world.

With over 20 published books to her credit it would appear that she has scaled the pinnacle of success, leaving little to be desired. But ironically, as this interview reveals, Mangala Godbole speaks of a sense of dissatisfaction and intense exhaustion. Having primarily chosen the life of a homemaker, this sensitive writer looks back on a difficult life full of conflict—between her duties as a wife and mother and her needs as a creative writer.

"For a woman writer, domesticity is destructive," she says, and goes on to explain how, in order to counter this, she has treated her own creativity "as a raincoat, to put on and to peel off" as she moves in and out of her domestic chores. This painful struggle between domesticity and creativity has left her fatigued as she grapples with the question foremost in her mind today: has it been worth the price?

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It's rare to meet a Marathi woman humorist—you must be one of the only ones around today. Was it an inborn talent?

Not at all. You could say I 'progressed' to writing humour, because it's certainly not how I began. As a child I was always fond of reading humour. I began writing only after marriage and even then I didn't write humour—life after marriage and the domestic situation that followed was hardly a laughing matter!

Was it that bad?

You see, I was born in Bombay and that's where I grew up. But since my husband worked in Karad (a small town in Maharashtra) I had to move there. Karad in the early '70s was the sort of place where you couldn't even find new books to read. There were no new movies to see, no theatre. . .

I had topped my Masters at Bombay University and then taught in a college for a while, but I couldn't get a job in Karad because I was a Brahmin and a woman, and this was a male Maratha stronghold. I was very angry and frustrated because I was denied a job despite my qualifications and competence.

Was this when you began writing?

In a way it was. I was married at 22, and the following year I wrote my very first article. Right across the road from our house was a women's rehabilitation centre. Every night, it became a centre of clandestine activity and many of the inmates would be on the streets, trying to earn a bit of money. This was a completely new world for me. Although I had lived in Bombay, my life had been very protected and I was intrigued by the conditions that pushed women to such extremes. I wrote about it and sent this article to *Stree* because it was the only feminist magazine around then. Vidyatai Bal was the editor. I had never met her, yet she published my article and it got a very good response. It was Vidyatai who then began encouraging me to write more.

And was it all smooth sailing from there . . .

Oh no, not at all. In '74 I had my first child—a son. My life got totally overwhelmed by domesticity. My parents were in Bombay, my in-

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laws lived in Bhopal. We would spend holidays with them, festivals were spent together with others in the family. I was so dissatisfied with this existence... I kept feeling this is not what my life is meant to be, so one-dimensional. Neither set of parents nor my family ever understood my restlessness. My mother always wondered why I wasn't content. She felt that my life lacked nothing . . . they had found me a suitable match, my husband was a good man—he was well-educated, he earned adequately and he cared for his family. What else was I looking for? But I remained intensely dissatisfied.

Did your writing reflect this restlessness?

My early writing was all very personal, about women and about how much they suffer, regardless of whether or not they are married, whether or not they are educated. I wrote incessantly about the deep sorrow in their lives. I wonder now how I wrote all that, but it's quite obvious that it was a reflection of my own state of mind. My husband used to travel a lot in his job, and my son was a premature baby and needed all my attention. I've spent entire days just holding that baby and being with him because he was so delicate. What upset me most was that even my own parents never sympathised with me. Their attitude was always, this is the way it has to be . . . this is what life is all about.

Since I was writing through all this, my writing came out of a tremendous struggle. Both an internal and external struggle . . . struggle for time and for mental space, and then the outward struggle which was as painful, the struggle of being accepted by editors. People don't believe this today, but many editors ignored and dismissed my work because I was writing from a small town like Karad. I still remember, in 1974, there was an important Sahitya Sammelan (literary conference) in Karad. I went there and literally haunted the writers and editors, telling them that I was keen on writing and asking for advice. But not one of them was willing to even listen to me. They felt that writing was just a charming and harmless hobby for married women to pass their time. Sadly, even today many of them feel this way.

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Didn't this shatter your enthusiasm?

It was very disheartening but it didn't destroy my spirit. I have written and published 22 books on my own, over the years, without belonging to any literary clique. Naturally, this has meant a very intense struggle. I began writing 25 years ago and I just wrote and wrote . . . I never stopped writing. I wrote for short story competitions and won prizes. In '76 I started writing for the Pune station of All India Radio and the response was tremendous.

Were these humorous stories?

No, they were all still based on the suffering of women . . . always the same mental and emotional suffering. All my writing was about this. It's strange, because it wasn't as if I was traumatised in marriage or that my husband was torturing me, but my writing portrayed all the agony in a woman's life.

In 1980 we moved to Pune. I had already published one book of stories. I got a job with the Kirloskar Press. I was 30 years old and already felt too old for a job. I was refused a job by All India Radio on grounds of my age, so I felt that there was only one avenue open to me now and that was my creative writing. I was determined to develop it.

I then got a job with *Stree* magazine and carved out a niche for myself. I think readers felt that I gave them quality writing . . . my language is my strong point. I never gave much thought to what was the accepted popular theme or subject then, I wrote exactly what I felt. For instance, when people were writing about the value of the parental home for married women, I said that this was an empty notion and that the modern woman will soon discover that no one really has the time for her—not even her parents. I also wrote that unless women were in dire financial straits it was not worth their while to take up jobs! This made for a lot of criticism, but I must say many women wrote back and agreed with me!

It was during my time with *Stree* that I began writing humour. Although I was fairly senior, age-wise, in terms of my work experi-

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ence I was one of the junior-most. I had another child by then and my world mostly revolved around my son and daughter. I knew very little of the outside world, and hardly anything of the working world . . .

But how and why did you switch to humour?

I need to explain this in some detail: I had always been a great admirer of *Stree* and also a keen observer of the feminist movement through that decade. It had influenced me deeply. I thought that in feminism lay the answer to all our problems. I do not think so now but I was very impressed by the feminist movement then. And yet, I began to feel that in its portrayal of feminist thought, *Stree* was becoming too one-dimensional—even in its literary content. I was uncomfortable about the fact that we seemed to have reached a stage where we were no longer looking at short stories for their quality; we only wanted to know whether or not they were 'feminist'. One of the sections I looked after in the magazine was letters to the editor, and a constant complaint from readers was that the magazine was getting far too heavy.

At our editorial meetings I began to put this view forward. I felt that if the magazine continued to go this way it would finally lose its readers and end up speaking only to the converted. We came up against a very practical problem: all the humour writers in Marathi were men and their humour denigrated women. How could we print this? It was unacceptable. So we began hunting for a woman writer to write humorous pieces.

But you had never written humour before. . .

I must tell you something about my days at *Stree* because that's closely linked with my becoming a humorist. What I remember most clearly about that time is how intensely happy I was working there. Every day when I stepped into the office, I would feel ten years younger just by interacting with all the wonderful people there. Although I was over 30, I would joke and fool around like a carefree teenager! Back at home all the burdens of a housewife and running a joint family would descend upon me again. But at the office my entire persona changed. So one day Vidyatai said to me that I was the right person to write those humorous articles. On a purely experimental basis, I began a humour column which I then continued uninterrupted for ten years!

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In the beginning it did not go down as well as I expected because most male readers found it difficult to take a woman joking about her husband and son, but by and by it became a huge success.

During those 10 years I did other writing as well. I enjoy serious writing but somehow the demand has been for my humour. The social comment in this writing was all done through situations at home and with the family. I know that male humorists do have a broader canvas which covers politics, parliament, etc. I could never do this because I was never exposed to them. While I don't regret it, I can't help wondering sometimes—if I had had greater exposure might I have grown more as a writer?

What do you think is a requisite for good creative writing?

It's true that creative writing only comes out of struggle—today I know that I could not have written before marriage because my life then was very comfortable. I read a lot before I was married but wrote nothing of any value. . . The agony needed for creative writing came only after marriage. The renowned Marathi writer, Shantabai Shelke, put it so well once when she said: "*Pratibha* (talent) always blossoms in isolation; never among crowds." So I feel that loneliness, nostalgia for the past, uncertainty and dread about the future . . . these are all very necessary for creative writing. A certain amount of agony is a must—sometimes even forced agony works—but without agony there can be no creative writing.

And what was the agony that came with marriage?

My family's acceptance of my writing did not come too easily. The mental involvement a writer feels with her work is tremendous and not too many people can understand this—especially when the writer is a woman. My generation of women was different. The way young women these days lay down certain conditions before marriage . . . we could never do that. It was as if we never had any rights. If I look at my own situation in a cold, logical manner, I feel that my husband would probably have been far happier if he had married a woman who was a full-time housewife. I cannot be that. . .

I'm normally a very easy-going person. I'm very indifferent about clothes—I don't care, for instance, if I'm wearing a green blouse with

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a blue sari—but when it comes to my writing I'm a tyrant. Until I find just the conclusion I want, until I hit upon the exact word I am looking for, I'm tormented. And this mental preoccupation, this total involvement with one's writing is an ongoing and all-consuming process. So if there was some housework that was not done properly, I was always blamed: "It's because you were writing such and such a story those days." This always led to immense conflict at home!

You made a very startling comment at the Marathi workshop. You said that for you creativity was like a raincoat to be removed and kept on a peg outside the door before you entered the house. Has it really been that tough?

I realised very soon that mundane, daily domestic chores have to be done even if they are meaningless, and in such situations I have to maintain my creativity as a separate entity. I think I've been successful in this. Today, in my role as a wife or mother, neither my husband nor my children have any complaints against me. Perhaps my talents as a homemaker may not be too refined. . . I cannot produce a Chinese meal on demand. But otherwise, I haven't done too badly. In fact, I've been so efficient that when I have to be away for longish periods, I prepare all the family's meals for the days I'm away. Even if the food is ultimately wasted I don't mind, but I don't want to hear anyone say that because I wasn't around they didn't get their meals.

I've always felt that if you get onto too much of a creative high, you begin to feel the total meaninglessness of such duties very acutely. Then it's almost impossible to fulfil them. And that is why I see creativity as a raincoat, to put on and peel off. It's because of my ability to do so that I've managed to lead a 'normal' life. Mind you, this ability did not come easily . . . it needed a lot of mental conditioning. On hindsight, and after years of experiencing this conflict of domesticity versus creativity, I'd say that if a woman writer is married two things are a prerequisite for her pursuit of creativity: one, a partner who will help out in the house equally, and only one child—enough to satisfy your maternal instincts! Often young married women ask me if they should follow their creativity and I advise them not to. You find yourself constantly shunting between writing and household chores. One can leave one's office work in the office and come home but you can't

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do the same with creativity. For a woman writer, domesticity is destructive.

Haven't you ever tried to wear this 'raincoat' permanently?

I know it's possible to merge this raincoat into my own skin . . . blend the two, but I'm terrified of the excruciating pain it causes. I have done it on occasion and it's been an agonizing experience, sheer torture. So painful that I'm not sure I could survive it for a long period. Besides, those around me will find me impossible to live with. Yet I must confess that my very best writing has been a result of this combining.

Women of my generation were victims of the superwoman syndrome. Often, even when I was in the throes of writing my story for a Diwali issue I would wake up early in the morning to make Diwali sweets for my family. I wonder now, what did I prove with all this? Is anyone even going to remember my sacrifices? But it was important that friends and family see me not just as a writer, but also as my children's mother who makes delicacies for them. Now I think it was a big mistake, but what's the use of repenting. . .

Some months back the *Maharashtra Times* ran a column in which writers were invited to write about their five most favourite dishes. I still recall how eloquently male writers described the food they love most. When my turn came, to my horror, I couldn't even think of two things I yearned to eat! This became a point of real conflict between my husband and me . . . he simply could not understand why I had no interest whatsoever in food. The only dishes I could write about, finally, were those I had eaten in my childhood—nothing from my present life. It was as if all desire for any special food was absolutely dead . . . it's as if the writer-housewife has nothing left that she can call her own. So if, by some miracle, you do find some mental satisfaction in your creativity, it's at the risk of great pain . . . a pain that no one but you can understand.

Now that your children are grown don't you find yourself with more mind-space and time for your writing?

Actually now I have begun to feel the need for my own private space for writing—a space away from home. I find I cannot write from home

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any more. I need to forget this world . . . these fans that need cleaning, the water that needs to be changed in the flower vases. . . But now I have a different concern. In a couple of years I will be free from all my family duties, but will I still have the energy, the passion, left to write? What if my creativity dries up? That's a huge worry for me. And that's the only challenge left to for me in this life—that when my housewife's responsibilities are done, I should be able to sustain this creative struggle. I am mortally afraid of that stage.

You don't think male writers have any of these apprehensions?

Whenever I think about the difference between me and my contemporary male humorists, I come up with the same answer: that for about 25 days in a month they leave their homes to travel. If I have to leave my home for even a few days, I have to plan for weeks before that. And at the end there's always the guilt that someone or the other in the family suffered in some way or other because of my absence. Lack of exposure and mobility have certainly limited my writing . . . if not the quality of writing, then certainly its scope.

Over the last five years I've made a conscious effort to travel a bit. Before that, I went nowhere unless it was some family function. I wouldn't even have attended a two-day workshop anywhere! It was only after my daughter finished school that I gradually ventured out, and that's been so valuable. I know now that exposure to newer experiences helps, but it has to happen at the right time for women. Now that the children are grown I feel less guilty. Besides, I have now achieved a certain status in the literary world and my family's acceptance of my writing has increased. The middle stage is very critical and difficult for women writers and I think many of us simply give up at that time. You need to be very strong-willed during that period, when you haven't yet proved yourself but you know you have the potential. The family's attitude often is: you spend so much time on your writing, what do you get in return? This is when women writers seriously wonder whether the price we have to pay is worth it.

But haven't things improved over the years in terms of attitudes towards women writers?

Of course, social acceptance of women wanting to become creative

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writers has increased over the years—when I was young it was not so. When I got married, most people thought my 'hobby' was strange . . . that my dreams and aspirations were abnormal. I think women writers do have a little more space now—women are choosing their own husbands, so to some extent I suppose that helps. . .

What I find unbearable is the habit of denigrating women writers like me who write about the domestic world. When male writers spend their entire life writing about their jobs in the municipal office or the high court, nobody criticizes their choice of subject. Why should the home and the domestic be seen as something inferior when it is actually the basis for everybody's life? Many people still feel that writing is a frivolous pastime for women. I feel that those women who do not need to make a living from their writing and yet write, must be admired—what an unstoppable urge these women must have to express themselves!

Once, at a function in Nasik, a male writer said to me, "You have such an easy time . . . stay at home and write about the same people, sometimes from this angle, sometimes from that." I said to him, "Why don't you try and write about it some time, and let's see if people continue to read you for 25 years." I find such attitudes extremely insulting. One of my life's ambitions is to become the unopposed chairperson of the Sahitya Sammelan and then talk about all this. Actually, I think men like to read sensitive writing about the 'domestic' but they shy away from writing it, afraid that their writing will be branded 'feminine' or 'soft'. Many women writers also feel that to be successful they have to write 'like a man', but this has never appealed to me. I can never write about something that I don't relate to.

To some extent I feel that the previous generation's women writers were more fortunate than us—at least they got some adulation. All positions of power in the world of literature—whether in literary academies or in institutions that give awards—are in the hands of men. And let's be honest, awards are very important because that recognition is critical and has to come at the right time . . . I wanted to be recognized at a certain period in my life but that never happened. Now my life is beyond the peak; it is on the descendant . . . but of course, I will continue to write until I die. At the age of 51 I can't see

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myself doing anything radically different, it will merely be a variation on the same theme.

Having said all this, I must also acknowledge that some of this lack of recognition is my own fault as well. To achieve this in one's profession, I think it is strategically important to belong to a club or an association of some kind. In that sense I have always been a bit of a loner, mostly stayed away from literary gatherings where you need to be seen. But again, where was the time for all this . . .

Who has been the inspiration for your writing?

No one in the family was ever even a source of encouragement, but the one person who gave me tremendous support and inspiration is my one-time editor, Vidyatai Bal. I know that all through my life when no one among my family and friends understood my struggle, she understood. She is one of the most sensitive human beings I have ever known.

Even if you call your writing a 'variation on a theme', what is that one dream you still nurture in your heart . . . that one piece of work you still want to produce?

Whenever I read *Pride and Prejudice* I feel I am so perfectly qualified to write a novel like that—a major book on inter-personal relationships. My in-laws are a large family and I have been a participant as well as observer to the relations, the clashes, the egos that go with a large family. I feel if I could write about it humorously, the sky's the limit. This is still one of my dreams, but I don't have the leisure for it yet. I'm waiting for when I have the kind of time and space in which I'm not answerable to anyone for even a single minute of my day. I yearn for it. If I want to sleep, I'll sleep; if I want to sit and stare, I'll do just that . . . because to write a novel like this your mind, your imagination, needs to be fully and totally steeped in creative thinking.

What I write about right now are small experiences which engross me for a couple of hours at a time, and then I come out of those creative spells. I'm beginning to find this kind of writing dissatisfying—both for me as for well as for my readers who, by now, expect something more from me. But I have two fears: one, that my body will give way before this happens, and two, that by the time I reach

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the stage when I can write that novel, my mental abilities will not be able to cope.

That's rather an extreme condition to be thinking of. . .
Much as I revel in this urge for creativity, I feel that if it could have been combined with the rest of my life with far less pain, then perhaps I wouldn't be so exhausted. At 51 I am utterly, utterly exhausted . . . tired to my very bones. It's as if my soul is worn out by this conflict of whether I should write or just do my duties. The price I've paid for trying to do both is this unbelievable fatigue. I often feel that I should simply get rid of everything; that I've had enough. While there's joy in whatever I've achieved, how do I cope with this exhaustion? Without the intensity and the struggle and the agony, I cannot create good writing. . .but with it comes the fatigue. It's just so, so difficult. . .

Interviewed by Gouri Salvi

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Rukmini Bhaya Nair

INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED for her work at the cutting edge of cognitive linguistics and literary theory, as well as for her poetry, Rukmini Bhaya Nair's (b. 1952) extensive corpus is marked by a 'polyphonous' style which ambitiously seeks to link her research in language, literature, gender and cultural studies to her poetic experimentation. She has been described by more than one critic as being the first significant postmodern poet in Indian English writing.

From the time she won an Essay Prize, as a student, in a competition organized by *La Stampa, Le Monde, Die Welt* and *The Times* in conjunction with the First International Exhibition on Man & His Environment, Turin, Italy, to the year 2000 which saw her selected as a 'Face of the Millennium' among writers by *India Today*, Nair has been the recipient of several honours and fellowships. In 1990, she won the first prize in the All India Poetry Society/British Council competition; her poems have since appeared in numerous anthologies such as the 1992 Penguin *New Writing in India* as well the 1999 collection, *Mosaic*, featuring award-winning writers from the U.K and India, and have been translated into languages ranging from Swedish to Bangla. She has also represented India at forums like the Commonwealth Writers' Conference, Cambridge, and the ICCR/SAARC* Writ-

*Indian Council for Cultural Relations/South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation.

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ers' Colloquium, Colombo. Apart from her numerous publications, including six major books, she contributes to most national newspapers and magazines and serves on the editorial boards of journals such as the *International Journal of Literary Semantics* (Berlin and New York) and *Biblio* (New Delhi).

However, her high-profile achievements within a patriarchal system leave Nair very open to the criticism that she is just another elite performer, privileged by her class, Cambridge doctorate and position as Professor at IIT, Delhi. A subject like censorship lies outside her purview. Nair counters this charge by suggesting that her academic training actually helps her discern hidden patterns of discrimination. For example, the ubiquitous Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) salute "Jai Shri Ram", she notes, is a reinterpretation—some would say a deliberate misreading—of the traditional greeting, "Jai Siya Ram", where Siya means Sita. Thus the name of Sita, the name of woman, still commonly found in proper names such as Sitaram, is subtly deleted from the lexicon of Hindutva. Nair maintains that this, too, is an act of vandalism, a kind of second *paataal pravesh* for Sita, and that she sees it as part of her task as a writer to monitor such contemporary incidences of linguistic violence across the Indian social spectrum. In any case, writers have always come from all classes and all places, and in the end it is literally their word, their writing, that is their bond. Her own goal is simply to continue to write and research, whatever the genre and however great the odds.

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I'm just going to start with a very prosaic, very basic question which is: did you always know you would write?

This is a good question . . . I didn't always know. No, I didn't always know I would write, not at all, but I did write without thinking about it as writing, specifically. In fact, I clearly remember my first poem which was written at the age of about eight or something—and it was obviously a dreadfully derivative poem. I'm sure everybody has written poems as children, but the fact is that I *remember* writing this poem. I remember very clearly the grey plastic cover of the diary in which I wrote it. That I recorded this trivial fact in my memory and it comes back to me to this day—that in itself gave me an inkling that, maybe, I knew this was a mode in which I could grow. Even if you don't always know that you will be a writer, perhaps you recognise the modes in which you can grow.

But is that a recognition that comes with hindsight or something that you already recognised as a child? Many young children write, and of course the first thing they write is poetry; but I'm very interested by your answer because I want to ask, then, whether from a very early age language *was important to you.*

Yes, this is what I was going to say. I think I had an immediate and quick response to words in the same way that some people seem to absorb music or numbers almost instinctively. And this may be why I produced the answer that I did to your first question—that, despite oneself or without knowing it, one moves towards certain modes, so you could say 'the body knows', or you could say that in some way you fit into certain types. For instance, what is interesting to me about that first poem is that it was wholly driven by rhyme rather than meaning, by instinct rather than reason. Maybe the first forms of censorship begin when we begin to impose—inevitably—the patterns of reason on instinct.

So, when did you know consciously?

Well, I kept writing in this childish mode all through school, but one of the things I began to do was also to let a few friends read my poems —and, you know, as soon as you get an external gaze you think of yourself as somebody attached to a particular mode. I think that the

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external gaze factor, the influence of my friendships, my family—for instance, my father reading Coleridge to me under a mango tree in Ranchi, my grandmother's stories—these small ordinary things that happen to every individual made me identify with this mode. So I don't think I ever took a deliberate decision to be a writer or a poet. But one of the things I remember doing at this stage was to store away unusual words and to keep these words in my head. I was a collector of words rather than a stamp or coin collector, and since I was quite a lonely child, this collecting—and later *re*collecting—of words was in itself a kind of odd, personal, identity-conferring activity.

Do you still share your work?

I went through a period between college and having my children when I shared very little of my work. I kept writing—I wrote poems and I painted—but I shared very little. So you could say that I went through a phase after school when I stopped sharing. Why I stopped is a question I have often asked myself, and I think one reason may be something that happened to me which I have never spoken about. It was not a romantic event but a traumatic experience for me, and it happened towards the end of college. It was post the Bangladesh war, when I went with my family for a holiday to Bangladesh via steamer. Two things happened at that time and both of them were very traumatic, but this Bangladesh event, let me tell you about it first.

Instead of a hotel, we'd decided to stay on the ship. The idea was that we'd go into town in the day, see all of Dhaka and come back to the ship late at night, and this is precisely what we did. Now, you know, the Ganges is a very deep river and I can't swim. . . So at about midnight we were crossing all these barges to get to the steamer which was 'parked' in the middle of the river, and I fell into the river and . . . I remember thinking when I fell into the river, oh, my god, I'm going to be dead before the age of 20! I sank to the bottom of the river, it was very deep and I couldn't swim, and I knew I was going to die. I remember (*laughs*) thinking about Archimede's Principle—that I should hold on to my nose because buoyant bodies do not sink, that I should try to remain conscious till the last minute. . . I never believed in god, so god isn't going to come my rescue now. So I felt both calm and, you know, *absolutely* clear that, looking back on my life

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there was nothing that I had done that I would leave behind that people could treasure or that could be a memory of me. Anyway. What happened was that I came up a bit and I hit the side of the ship. I remember seeing it—white and nail-studded—very clearly, but then I went down again. It was like dying and being reborn and then dying again in the space of a few minutes. I now know that many people who have had NDEs or Near Death Experiences speak of seeing such a brilliant white light . . . so maybe it was not really the side of the ship that I saw, for how could anyone see anything in pitch darkness? I think a lot of writing comes from the need to resolve such troublesome enigmas.

Then there was the other side, the living, the physical side . . . my family was on the ship but they couldn't do anything to save me. You know, the space between the barge and the ship is very narrow, there is no space in which to dive in and the cross-currents are very strong, so they were absolutely frozen, panic-stricken. I mean, it was so much worse for them than it was for me. Then one of the sailors went down the side of the ship to try to get me and I put my hand up like this . . . and he kind of felt my hand and pulled me out, and when I came up I was completely out. But I remember that I had been holding on to this box of sweets before I fell in, and I said . . . I remember apologising that I had dropped this box of Bangla *mishti* and *then* I passed out! I think this shows how the small, negligible, almost absurd, things still continue to matter in the face of a much bigger crisis—that one is not erased by the other . . .

I remember floating in this kind of space, I knew what it was to confront death, but I felt no fear and I was not in pain. It made me in a way, different. I had passed through something which was a rite of passage and because it was accidental, it seemed to have had more of an effect on me—and yet I never talked about it. No, that's wrong, I did obsessively talk about it to my friends for a year after it happened till one of them said, you know, you will lose all your friends if you keep on like this. . . . After that I didn't talk about this event for at least fifteen years.

But did you write about it?

I never wrote about it. It is curious but I think I still haven't under-

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stood, truly understood, what happened to me, but I know that something happened and not just physically. That's why I've never written about it. But I would say the *one* reason why I'm a writer today is because I came out of that alive, the other side of death. I keep trying to get at that experience and I haven't been able to.

You mean you keep trying to communicate it through your writing?
You could say communicate it, though I can't communicate it directly and even now my telling has been quite messy. It has not been a neat sort of, you know, a literary piece. It has been a kind of naïve retelling of the nature of that experience. It will not seduce anybody, but for some reason I actually attribute a lot of meaning to it and it certainly made me think about the fact that I wasn't sure I would live and I'd left nothing behind . . . and it remains miraculous. I was dead and . . . reborn by the age of 20. Just like that. I don't know what the effect is and I don't want to know too much. I'm talking about it now because I think it affected everything, the way I reacted to people, everything.

Have you had any other kind of experience that has been so definitive for your writing?
I mentioned two incidents at the beginning. I have just told you, in reverse order, about the Bangladesh event. The other happened a year or two earlier. I think I was at the end of my first year in college and we had a new maid in our house in Kolkata. She had never been in a city before and one day my mother discovered her spitting in the kitchen, and she was extremely upset . . . she said the girl had to go. The maid didn't seem to understand why what she had done was so terrible and this frustrated my mother even more. Anyhow, I jumped into the fray. I told my mother that she couldn't dismiss the girl for this reason. If she went, I'd leave home, too. My mother, who has a very strong personality and was not about to be intimidated by a teenage daughter said, go! So I took whatever money I had—I think it was about fifty rupees—and a change of clothing and left the house . . .

All day I wandered about the city. Then, towards the evening I met a woman who guessed something was amiss and asked whether I had anywhere to stay for the night. I said, no. So she said she could

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take me to Mother Teresa's orphanage where I would find shelter. I remember, a nun called Sister Anne interviewed me and the strange question that she asked—I suppose it was not that strange, really—she said, child, are you a fallen woman? I was appalled. I felt like Mary Magdalen or someone! I tried to explain to her about the fight I'd had with my mother. Whether she believed me or not, she said I could stay as long as I liked in the orphanage and help out with the kids. I did this for a few days before my parents found me because I called my father on his birthday and the police were able to trace that call! Again, although this incident was not accidental but involved deliberate protest on my part, it was my family who were much more traumatised than I was. They didn't know whether I had been raped or murdered or where I was during those nights. When they found me, it was the only time I have seen my father cry. . . You can imagine what it is like for a middle class family to have a girl missing nights and not on a romantic escapade either! The phrase 'fallen woman' may sound absurdly old fashioned, but the mentality and the terrible fears that go with it are very contemporary—and feed into the censoring perspective very powerfully. For years afterwards, in Kolkata circles, I was known as the *pagli*, the mad one, who ran away from home on behalf of a maid. But that girl, I remember her eyes . . .

Kolkata was, and is, the prototype of a political city. We all went on protest marches, read radical poetry, acted in reinterpreted plays, waved banners. I worked in the Bangladesh refugee camps in Salt Lake for a whole year, but as far as one's writing goes, I think it is the odd personal angle that makes one suddenly see the connections between large areas like class and one's own awakening, sexuality, and the possibilities of rebellion and change. . . What remains with the writer are common sensations like the smell of disinfectant and dead bodies in the camps, the smell of piss and baby food in the Mother Teresa house. . . This is what she makes her politics out of, these are materials from which she constructs her resistance to social censorship . . .

Drowning and running away from home are not exactly commonplace experiences . . .

(*Slowly*) I think that I'm not really a writer who has had, you know, in any way an overtly exciting life. I'm not. And much of the way in

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which my own work is defined—the way I defined my own work after these experiences—is that I started noticing and remembering the very small rather than the big things. In fact, I now find that all my writing relies on this technique of using a very small incident as the nucleus of the larger structure—and of course I'm not the only woman writer who has privileged the small things . . .

There have been defining moments in my life but they did not necessarily come after the drowning incident, they came before it. Just one of them, which I would take from my childhood, is the experience of telling my first lie, and the reason I think this is so important is that one of my strongest writerly emotions is guilt. I think that guilt and your theme of censorship are very related. With the experience of drowning there is this sense you get of an erasure of your entire previous life, and that relates to the theme of censorship in an indirect kind of fashion, I guess. But in a much more direct way, I feel the emotion of guilt is central to an understanding of censorship. So since that is one of the subtexts of our conversation, I want to talk about this moment because it involves many of the elements that later on became important—what kinds of emotion I brought to bear upon the kinds of details I noticed.

I was about four and I was sitting outside our house in Delhi, in Sujan Singh Park, with Madina who was the general factotum of the house, and my parents were having a party inside. It was about dusk. Madina and I started to argue. I said, it's becoming night, and Madina answered, no, this is not night, it's evening. He corrected me. We fought for a bit and then I said, I'll go inside and ask my parents. So I did. My mother said, Of course it's evening—but then I went outside and told Madina that my mother says, it's night-time! Two or three things I remember very clearly—I remember feeling absolutely degraded and terrible even as I said it. So, even at that age, there was my face to be saved and I saved my face, but it was at a cost, and I did it to a person who couldn't possibly go and ask my mother himself. It was a linguistic issue, too—evening vs. night—the meaning of words, and for me the fact that I censored, that I wiped out what my mother said, the truth, that I gave another version of it and I rewrote the text, at that age, it still bothers me. For some indefinable reason it impacted me, that's one of the incidents I keep going back to . . .

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But how has it been a motif in your writing?

It's been a motif in my writing because I have always felt that there is a discrepancy between what we *say* and the way things *are*, what you say in your writing and what you say in everyday life. The task of writing is to try and bridge this gap, to find the continuities. Often we perceive a disjunction between what we say in our writing and how we construct ourselves in everyday life, but in fact I think there is a very strong continuity between them. You build your life, you interweave your life in your writing and your writing in your life. To that extent the kind of emotions you bring to bear upon bridging that gap matter, and it's always the darker emotions . . . like embarrassment, guilt, shame which motivate the need to explore. That is why the emotions recollected-in-tranquility idea is so important in literature. You know, you live through, even enjoy, the moment but often with guilt, and then it comes back—and you want to understand. Did I really see the side of that ship or was it my brain fooling me? I still don't know. For me, everything I do is a kind of trying to understand, through language, these limits of the self. Today, I'm doing a big project on lying and I think the reason I'm doing it is . . . if you look at fiction, if you look at poetry, if you look at any of these forms—you must ask the question, where is the lie situated? Do we necessarily have to lie, what are the forms of shame and of fear that cause us to represent and misrepresent? This question bothers me and I think it is a recurring theme in my writing.

I was speaking to Mridula Garg the other day and she said that the metaphor of guilt is very important in women's writing. She spoke about two other metaphors, the metaphor of motherhood, and the metaphor of sexuality. Would you agree that the metaphor of guilt is also a feature of women's writing?

I definitely think it's a feature of women's writing, and I think that the guilt in the case of women is much stronger. The reason for this is not only worked into stereotypes, like motherhood, that you mentioned, but also because the motherhood metaphor supports the guilt metaphor. These two are interwoven. We feel guilty if we don't have children and we feel guilty when we do, and since these are our functions whichever way you play your game, guilt surfaces again and

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again. I think guilt is important because that thing we call conscience, the structure of conscience, is made out of feelings of guilt and responsibility. So how do we separate responsibility from guilt? This is a complex question and also an urgent one.

But is it more urgent for a woman writer?

Why should guilt be linked to my writing as a woman? I'll tell you why, and here I'm talking personally. When I speak in all these voices, linguist and poet and critic and so on, the immediate feeling one has is that one is enormously privileged. I come from a class where I had the opportunity, by the merest chance, mere contingency, to explore all these things, apparently without guilt, in a country where the most basic forms of literacy, of voice, are denied to people. I feel that this very sense of privilege was in a way the spur which urged me to write and to notice things. Now you may say that this is not particular, this is not special to a woman, it's special to a class, and I would say yes, but the woman is the most emblematic member of that class when it comes to language. Why do I say this? Because I think there is something called the 'bad rani' syndrome which operates especially among women who write in English, who belong to the upper class. If you look at myth and fables and folktales, from which I draw quite a lot of my inspiration, one of the recurrent figures you get is this bad rani, the woman who, instead of producing—and this goes back to the metaphor of motherhood—who instead of producing normal children, produces goats or chickens or some other unnatural form of offspring. As a result she's a focal point of misogyny. The offspring that she produces *are* unnatural but is *she* to blame? I think in some ways, 'foreign' English language productions constitute exactly these changeling offspring. One feels an awful sense of guilt because one is not writing in a mother-tongue. One gets into a frame of mind where one thinks, I do not have a mother-tongue, I'm producing a changeling child and so I'm producing language turned inside out. I'm unwholesomely elite, a bad rani. I may be a rani, but I'm alien, the seed that I'm producing and giving birth to is unnatural seed. I could be wrong, but I think the male writer doesn't carry this burden of guilt to the same extent because of not having to deal with the metaphor of birth, of giving birth to language. He is not so trapped in that meta-

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phor. So I think the bad rani syndrome affects people like myself much more. It makes me feel that my privilege is something that distorts my language and therefore the style in which I write can become extremely contorted. But more than that it also affects the way in which I look at problems, I look at details. I am driven by the possibly false dogma that my position should push me to speak for those who are also marginalized but don't have the privileges that I have. I'll give you the example of *Ayodhya Cantos* . . .

> *In fact, my next question is linked to that because you said you look at the small things, but the inspiration for the* Ayodhya Cantos *was something monumental, and you took it on.*

Yes, but Ritu, let me tell you, the seed of my modern *Ramayana* was very small—and I would really like to dwell on this point. When I went to Ayodhya after the 1992 demolition, I met with these girls who make the garlands for the temples and they refused to tell me their names. I knew they were called Amina, Syeda, Rehana, and so forth, but they wouldn't tell me—they ran away. Now I think this is terrible, when children of that age can self-censor in this acute way, and that they are distrustful of every stranger. So this small incident, something that is so fleeting that you might even think you imagined it—that was the seed from which this enormous, elaborate, complex structure which drew on myth and everything, was erected. What made me make Sita a twelve-year old girl, what made me make her Sita-Sitara, Hindu-Muslim, what made me get her into this relationship with Hanuman in the chai-shop, what subalternised the whole event for me. . . I think it was just confronting the silence of a possible Amina or Syeda who would not tell me her name; that she made the garlands but she was not prepared to die while she made them. So something *so* tiny can motivate a large piece of work. If that detail is not there, then your whole text lacks that spark of life. So you need that spark always, and then of course it also relates to all the questions we want to discuss concerning censorship: am I appropriating these children's stories? Is my class privileging me? Is there any other way to do this? All these questions arise, and yet I feel that because the girls could not tell their story and that I was privileged to be able to travel there and see things for myself, and that I saw them the way I

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did, places the onus upon me to tell that story. But there are these residual feelings of guilt which come up again. Whose story is it? Is it my story? Is it their story? Do I have the right to tell it on their behalf? And these are the questions at the heart of the censorship debate too: whose story gets told, who tells it, from what perspective they tell it. And, of course, the seed may be very, very tiny, it may even be alien.

It's a very courageous story, a very powerful story—so did you ever censor yourself while you were writing it?

You know, I grew up in a highly liberal background where self-censorship was never on the surface, so I could say I did not censor myself but that would be wrong, because language itself is the most powerful censoring tool, ever. It picks out certain elements of the world and doesn't pick out others. The languages I do not know, or the emotional repertoires I am not comfortable with, exclude whole varieties of experience. They censor the choices I make. For example, I did not push the sexual angle in Sita's relationship with Hanuman and I think this was something which troubled me, which, given my background, I didn't know that I could handle. . . Not only handle in terms of presenting it but much more importantly, handle internally, whether I could deal with a sexual relationship between an older man, Hanuman, and a very young girl, and finally I left it out of my story.

Do you think it was a particularly womanly inhibition or was it just spontaneous?

I think it was from the gut, and it was not particularly womanly, but then is it something that a man would be less inhibited about—that's one question we can ask. If a man saw a story in producing a sexual liaison between Hanuman and Sita, would he write it or not? Well, you know, one's sex is itself culturally mediated, so on certain issues what is called a 'gut reaction' in men and women is really a deeply embedded cultural reaction.

But perhaps they would hesitate because Hanuman and Sita are such powerfully loaded figures, not necessarily because they hesi-

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tate to take up a sexual relationship. Because it's Sita and Hanuman, not just any old man and a young girl.

Yes. I think, if I pushed myself, I would say that I couldn't bear the pain of seeing Sita violated in *that* way. I could see her raped, but I could not see the idea of friendship and trust violated. I mean, maybe I was not courageous enough to face that internal tension in my text. I think, if I was inhibited it was because I couldn't face it, because I didn't want to vitiate my story so that I myself lost sympathy for Hanuman. I needed him because I needed a person, a man, at the centre of my story who was a bedrock of trust, and I think this bedrock of trust is important for us to be able to confront the issue of what Utopias we want.

What's beyond censorship after all? If we lift the censors, what is it we want? I think it's very important for us in any project which involves the concept of what a woman wants, to ask what kind of languages we want, what constitutes an uncensored or Utopian space where that bad rani does not have to be a contortionist any more. This is the space of cultural wholeness or whatever you want to call it, of solidarity. One of its crucial elements will be trust and lack of guilt, so that you are not afraid, so that you can confront things within yourself and outside. So my Utopia would have these things. This idea of a space where you can ask questions and carry your enquiry to any far point is to me foundational in imagining what a woman's language might look like. I think the danger for me is that this space of questioning can get very reduced in certain types of society, aggressively patriarchal ones for example, because after a point these questions are not only not asked, they do not even occur to people.

Has that happened in your experience?

Of course it's happened. Very much so, for one good reason. Once you are schooled in certain languages it is much harder to take in other people's perspective. And this is where I think that women's oral conversations, the point I have made to you earlier about women's language being interruptive—having an alternative AB-AB-AB open-ended structure, where first you speak, then I, then you, and so on—is important. Because it allows a space for the other, allows somebody to interrupt you. In this sort of approach to language you get to listen

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actively and create a space for someone else's interjection. It breaks down the ABCDEF ad infinitum narrative structure of the patriarchal monologue—which in itself then offers a quite new perspective. Otherwise the question that is in someone else's mind—*her* mind—just doesn't occur to you. And this is because you are trapped in an academic space, a middle class space, a woman space and so on—and I know how terribly hegemonic certain types of discourse which I myself practice, are. Academic discourse, for instance, seems essentially hierarchical and a certain part of oneself has to be given up because, to participate in scholarly discourse, you have to accept the idea of footnoting. In effect, this is also to accept that there are dominant 'master texts' that must be heeded, and everyone else is a handmaiden—or a foot-maiden!

But this interruptive mode, how is it to be transformed into a generic form?

This is a difficult question, and I really think that the reverse happens. I think men metaphorically turn into women when they write, because writing is an internalized, introspective space. In a way, you know, what I'm describing as women's everyday practice—that we talk, that there is no grand narrative, no closure, etc.—this process is also reflected in a writer's practice. As a writer you have to attend to other people's voices, you have to make them in your head. I think of this as really a feminization of the mind. That's what it is—a man turns into a woman in the process of writing. It's a different matter that he doesn't admit it, and it's again a different matter that writing itself, putting it down, as opposed to *thinking* like a writer, is a very, very dominating mode. It dominates speech because it freezes it. It is speech made silent. You need to be silent when you write, and you need leisure when you write and of course, you know, we can talk while stirring a pot and holding a baby, but you cannot do that with writing, you cannot stir a pot and hold a baby when you write!

Writing is at once the ultimate censor and the ultimate weapon against censorship. The fact is that writing requires that other people live for us, live our lives for us, somebody else brings us our food, somebody else cooks for us . . . this is what has made writing such an upper class mode in the past. Men like Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Tagore

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and Flaubert created great portraits of women—Rosalind, Anna Karenina, Sucharita, Emma Bovary—but they had other people, often women, to take care of the daily grind of living for them. People live for us, you know, so that we can write. In that way, writing tends to take the contents of speech and transform them into monologue, so it's quite dominant, it's a very dominant mode. But in the internal space *before* you write it down or as you are writing, imagining those voices, allowing them to interrupt your thoughts . . . that is a very feminine mode, and I have always said that writing is stolen, it has stolen this imaginative initiative from women. Otherwise, how can we explain the fact that study after study has shown that girls acquire speech sooner than boys, and are more fluent and adept at handling language, and yet have produced far fewer 'great' writers? Surely there has had to be an endemic, unselfconscious censorship of women across the board for this to happen.

So in that sense would you say that censorship is gendered?
I think censorship is gendered for this very reason. I don't want to use the word biological lightly, but I would say that the differences between men and women in absolute terms are very slight, biologically. Indeed between all individuals—I keep repeating this—we are 99.9% made to the same pattern, we are genetic twins. Sex, colour, height, all these differences amount to about one or two parts in a thousand, so they're very small, but culture is a device for magnifying differences—that is my definition of culture. It takes these tiny biological differences and blows them up. As a result, power play becomes almost inevitable in our cultural and psychological routines. Much depends on who seizes the initiative, which difference is blown up. So censorship is gendered because it has long been created in a masculine mode. I say this because—and I'm not saying it lightly—males traditionally have had easy access to leisure, they had wives and mothers to live for them. This may be changing, but over the centuries when women did the child-bearing and child-caring they talked, but they couldn't write much. Men, on the other hand, played a five-minute part in a biological process and as a result they had an infinitude of leisure to play around with, and they used this leisure to create culture This is why I call culture a "secondary sexual charac-

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teristic". You know, the lion's mane, the peacock's tail, they just announce maleness. A peacock's tail doesn't allow it to fly, it slows it down, but it announces through all its power, beauty and glory, the maleness of this animal. So culture is a display text for the male. Leisure has indeed been structured to create beautiful, seductive things within patriarchies . . . so every form we really value in culture is, in a way, a form imbued with maleness down the ages.

Censorship, which is tied to display and rules, which is tied to ideas of what constitutes a good work of fiction, a good work of art—all these things, these norms, these rules, these institutions are therefore all inevitably patriarchal. Biology made the base and culture made the superstructure, and so the result of this long story is *of course* that censorship is gendered. There is a logic in this which is incontrovertible, I mean there is a logic in this which is very clear. Therefore in order to determine the way in which these norms can be challenged we *have* to understand that censorship is a gendered thing. Not because women can't do the same things as men, of course they can and they can also be as good censors as any man, but the question of censorship does not centre on *ability*. It never did. Censorship is about *rights*. It has nothing to do with women can't do this or that, women can do all the things that men do, but the point is they have not been able to do them.

Would you say, then, that for women writing is a subversive activity?

(*Pauses.*) It is not always subversive. . . Of course, to grab hold of, to take up the pen is an act of subversion in and of itself, that is certainly true, but I think writing becomes truly subversive when it challenges basic social distinctions such as, for example, the traditional distinction between male and female. In Cartesian thought you would say that 'the mind has no sex' and men and women are the same when it comes to mental ability, and I would agree with this. But I think that the human mind is special because it has the ability to *imagine* itself in a variety of sexes, and when women take up the pen I think their writing is much more open to the idea that there can be many intermediate sexualities. It is more attuned to this idea than traditional male writing, and in opening up to this hermaphrodite range, it

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actually presents a new way of looking at things. Take dress—women will dress like men but men do not often dress like women, and this is because the traditional structures are in place and it's better to dress like a man. But go a little beyond this and, in a way, this marginality gives women an advantage because they can try out different garbs and yet maintain their difference. They can experiment in dress, in behaviour, in all the range of activities which the men have set up, without becoming men. So, logically speaking, they have many more alternatives available and they can—and should—strategically exploit all those points along the continuum between the well set-up male and female and gender divisions. I think it's very possible that women are less trammelled mentally . . . because they have seen things from the margin for so long that they are less trapped in stereotypes.

Would you agree with the French feminists that there is such a thing as women's language, that there is a real and positive difference which is manifest in women's speech?

Yes, there is. You know that drowning incident I told you about . . . well, a few years after that happened, I went out into the villages of West Bengal, into small villages which had had very bad floods in the late 1970s, it must have been one of the worst floods in 50 years—it was 1978, I think. Everything was washed away, the whole world was washed away—I saw cattle drowned, houses submerged, the whole world was wiped out, and so the women were rebuilding their world through their language and I tape-recorded many of these danger-of-death stories. And in these sorts of crises, you know, you lose some of your inhibitions because the circumstances are extremely unusual. So when these women told me their stories I could see all the features of women's speech across the social spectrum, and I found all these features—more comparators, more descriptors, more exclamations, more of *everything*, more silence, reformulations. . . There was this tremendous plenitude. So obviously women's speech itself has these characteristics, important characteristics, but these have traditionally been dismissed as childlike, as untutored, the idea that you're jumping from subject to subject, that you don't have a straight story-line, and so on. . . But I would argue that the capacity to tell joint stories, to quickly make mind-jumps shows your capability for

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analogy and metaphor, and also shows the capacity to make connections between disparate subjects. These are basic intellectual tools. All these are ways of understanding masks, understanding roles; all the things that have been dismissed as naïve ways of speech are actually full of tremendous sophistication. What I would like to emphasize is that these are modes that women have made . . . but they are not just female modes. I am *not* saying that men gossip less, talk less or anything like that . . . Gossip is *not* a female mode in that sense, all I'm saying is that these 'other' genres are full of possibility yet they have been rejected in a system where you need to maintain hierarchies. If you took all that, made all that available, it would be a contribution to the idea of a feminist Utopia . . .

But would it make for a new language while writing, would you write like that? Would you have written Ayodhya Cantos *like that? Now you* have *used a multiplicity of voices in it, so you have broken the form, and you have also introduced in it the kind of interruptions that force you to read simultaneously, but it is still an extremely coherent poem.*

It is, I think you're right, it is coherent. Now, I don't think of coherence as a bad thing, but I also don't think that a new language will have no elements of the old because language itself . . .

Language or structure? When you spoke about these narratives of disaster, you said that they had the potential to forge a new idiom. I understood that to mean that it had as much to do with language as with structure, which is the structure of thought, the structure of presentation and the structure of communication.

Yes, I think that it would certainly widen, in a very rich way, the structural possibilities of communication, but whether it would change communication so radically that it would be an entirely different thing, I do not know . . .

Would it be one of the Utopias? Could it provide that space which is an uncensored space . . .

It could, but what I would like to say is that it is my belief that when you totally give up, *sacrifice* a mode, an old way of doing things, there

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is a certain violence in that as well. Now, as I see it, the human mind, I would say as a linguist, has a tendency, a deep tendency which would be very hard for any of us to give up, to see patterns in things. If we look at our own lives . . . they seem to straggle, you know, lurch from episode to episode, sometimes crisis-ridden, sometimes calm. . . Real life is more like a television serial than like the plot of a well-crafted play, but a writer's job is to shape and present all this so that it speaks to people, stays in their memories. I mean, writing is not just sociology and women are not just sociological objects. Part of the pleasure of writing is to create patterns that matter in the culture.

So writing is a form of pleasure, of giving pleasure, and this in itself is prototypically female, I think. . . At least that's how we've been trained to think, and this is why I talked about the feminisation of the male mind. To put yourself out, to give pleasure to someone else, this altruistic impulse is very important because it's a very humane impulse. It militates against censorship. So while binaries make patterns for us so that we can have balance, we can have harmony—these are the traditional male virtues, elegance, harmony, simplicity —altruism nuances those virtues. My point is we don't necessarily have to give up the binaries in order to widen the spectrum, but we do have to place the binaries in a relationship with patterns that are more subtle and perhaps have a different kind of *morality* attached to them, as well. Because the binaries censure, they say we cannot tolerate anything which doesn't fit . . . whereas the intermediate spaces say that the more you enrich, the more the binaries themselves become porous, and the more categories there are to play with. Viewing the world in this multiple way can mean that we have, for instance, many neglected resources for irony and humour at our disposal. Such genres involving laughter and a raised eyebrow are so much gentler than the forms of censorship that want to wipe out anything that does not conform to a set worldview. They are the literary equivalents of physical boundary-crossings. Imagine a world where women could laugh freely, in mosques, in temples, even in their own houses . . .

So far in feminist thought we've noticed these patterns of censorship and we've said okay, what is required is that we give women control over their own bodies, control over leisure time, we organise crèches and provide better access to information so that we have

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control over knowledge . . . But I think control over *the sites of pleasure* is what we are talking about when we talk about writing, and this has been the most difficult . . . to wrest control over an entire aesthetics, over pleasure, beauty and morality . . .

> *Many women writers have said that they write from anger, from unhappiness, from rage, from despair . . . very few of them actually say that they are writing to give pleasure. Aren't we at a very early stage of that?*

I agree, but think of the end product, the thing of beauty which comes out of this writing. It's true, as I said to you in the beginning, that the emotions which initiate and carry us through when we are writing are often dark and guilty, so it *is* anger which makes me write, me too. Anger, frustration, all these things, and this is true even in male writing because these feelings are much stronger—rage, lust, anger—all of which are in the pack of 'bad' emotions. They are like baying hounds, they actually drive all our writing. Men *and* women say this *is* the reason I wrote this book because I had to protest, had to raise my voice, but what comes at the end of it is what gives pleasure.

When I read a poem and it moves me, it touches me, it is not just sorrow that I feel, I feel a palpable rage and anger, sometimes self-deprecation, all these things . . . but what comes out of it is something which stays with you—*that* is a site of pleasure, of insight. What else can you call it? Who creates that pleasure, in what language they create it, those constitute the poet's exercise of her freedoms, her individual contribution to culture. The strategies we use to combat the terrifying things which happen to us, those things we can talk about as 'women's language' and so on, but really you know, what constitutes the aesthetic object, what comes out of it *has* to be a site of pleasure.

Human beings live because they feel trust, happiness, deep tenderness, all these things. To feel these emotions towards others, in the presence of others, involves an altruistic motivation and I absolutely deny that what comes out of frustration and rage is more frustration and rage—at least when it comes to creative endeavour. I think what comes out of frustration and rage is often solidarity, and we would not be writing fiction if we were only creating negative emotions. I

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don't think so. I mean, writing for me would be a dead end if everything I wrote never showed me light and space, where the light falls on the landscape in a different way. If this did not happen then I think I would just lie down and die, because I would ask, what is my writing doing? That's also why I read—I read even if they are terrible things that are written about, because what remains with me after the terror is something much more liberating than terror.

Oddly, I think one of things that certain women writers are often accused of—and I, definitely, have been accused of—is that they are too cerebral, too removed from raw emotions. Obviously they are concealing something... This processing of emotion is said to be essentially a male technique, so that what comes out is clever rather than deep. The accusation, in my own case, is one of being narcissistic ...

Are you saying that men would not be accused of being cerebral...
This accusation would not so easily be laid at their door, and it would quite likely not be connected to the subsequent charge of narcissism, but it's what I face all the time especially because I'm a professor, a critic as well.

And it's a powerful form of censorship?
I think it's very powerful because you begin to think it's not allowed, somehow it's bad, it's creating an unaesthetic object. It's not giving anybody pleasure, I should withdraw it. You retract your tentacles. What these accusations are basically saying is, this is taboo for you, don't you dare show off, don't you be narcissistic. Cerebral writing is a form of showing off and therefore it's narcissistic. Going back to my peacock's tail analogy—when a man dances in the realm of culture and produces a book which is essentially about himself... nobody says Hemingway wrote this narcissistic book all about himself and the Spanish Civil War, they say what a wonderful understanding of war! But if a woman does this she is ignored or denigrated ... so showing off is considered part of the male dance but not of the female dance. The female dancer can't show off, she must show, but she mustn't show off! This is the difference.

What I would say about narcissism is that I realized for myself—after this long gap when I didn't talk, didn't write, didn't communi-

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cate but attended to bonding, home, children—and somewhat less energetically!—to my career . . . when I came back to writing and producing in public, I realized with a shock that I was in fact a feminist writer. It was that classic 'shock of recognition' which is celebrated in literary myth.

The first time my sex hit me really hard was not when I was engaged in romance, flirtation or career but when I looked into the mirror of my writing, because almost every single poem was about being female. Every single bit of work I have done, major or minor, all involved the 'woman question' . . . although even now it is not with this express purpose that I usually set out on a project. For example, I didn't think of myself as investigating women's speech when I was looking at narrative structure and danger-of-death stories but I ended up writing something that seemed to be significant in this area. . . Then it struck me what Germaine Greer meant when she asked, why are certain things forbidden, why is touching yourself, tasting your own menstrual blood, why are these so *terribly* taboo, why is it that if a woman does this she is considered *so* dirty. If such natural curiosity is suppressed does it comes out as polluting, dirty, etc. And this touching yourself, seeing yourself, staring at yourself in the mirror of your writing . . . I mean, it offers a literary analogy because it is very clearly forbidden. It sounds extreme, but it could be that writing is a form of touching yourself, admiring yourself, looking at yourself for the first time. The shock of seeing that you are a woman in a naked kind of way, through your writing, may have been greater for me because, as I told you, my life has been quite ordinary and protected. Still, I couldn't have written without first confronting my femaleness and all the taboos that surround it. And this really shocked me. Because I don't think a man has to confront his maleness in the same way when he writes. I just don't think that. So these accusations of being narcissistic are a shock for women schooled in altruism, because writing *is* narcissistic.

Writing is a mirror and it is a mirror in which, for the first time, you get the opportunity to see yourself, to actually look at yourself, and that's where censorship is located. Between the altruism that is an important feature of being a woman, and the narcissism that is an

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important feature of being a writer, that's where I think censorship must be renegotiated . . .

This being the case, that the accusation of narcissism and of being cerebral is something that women writers are particularly vulnerable to, and also that altruism is expected of them, isn't censorship almost inevitable for them? The more they write the more they will transgress, and the more masculinised will their practice become—won't censorship be inevitable then?

Yes. As we said earlier, the very act of picking up the pen involves censorship, and it continues right through because you're writing in a society where every move has to be viewed against a set of injunctions, a thou-shalt-not set of injunctions. So censorship becomes a twin of women's writing. This is what Coetzee has called an internal mirror where you have what he calls an internal censor twin, cherished as well as hated. You have to cherish the oppression because your writing refers to it and you must highlight its details . . . at the same time you have to hate it because it is a curb, and you recognize it as a curb, which means that basically your exploration or your understanding is being chopped, so that is the pain of actual curtailment.

So limits to the literary imagination . . .

Yes, limits to the imagination, it's that which is the curb, and the terror of it is that for many women there is both the physical threat to their bodies as well as the threat to their writing . . . you know, people use this image of a spider spinning threads out of its own body, and women, the threads they spin, they literally spin out of their physical bodies. . . Much of the history of women's writing has been to find those rare moments when they have managed to spin their stories out of an environment so physically demanding that finding minimal time and space was a cruel struggle. I've never had this kind of physical censorship, but mental censorship starts from quite early on. . .

By mental do you mean self-censorship?

I think it's self-censorship, and it's also the fact that in a way you're operating in a context of near-total indifference. The figure of

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Cassandra in Greek myth is one who can see into the future. She anticipates dread events but no one heeds her. To me it's interesting that Cassandra is a female because then this trope implicitly underlines the fact that a woman can be brutally ignored even when what she has to say is both tragic and true. I was recently reminded of this connection between poetry and prophesy when we helplessly witnessed the Gujarat carnage, because although the *Ayodhya Cantos* is set in Uttar Pradesh and is about the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, it actually begins with a long segment set in Gujarat. It was almost prophetic there, anticipatory in a very specific way, because of course there is a political line of descent from the ghastly events of 1992 to those of 2002. But not only was this book a relatively low-profile one in publishing terms, I was myself schooled, in effect, to self-censor and not scream its message from the roof-tops. . .

So we modern day Cassandras are likely to be read, if at all, within a system where our work, almost by definition, doesn't merit serious attention, even from ourselves! We may not be led away in chains as some women writers have been, then and now, but we should be prepared for the fact that people will not take us—or our causes—up in the way writers all over the world have taken up, say, Rushdie's cause. Instead we are very likely to be accused—and this is perhaps the most familiar charge of all against feminists!—of whining about imagined grievances. That is why I should like to repeat that in my own case I have obviously been much, much luckier than many writers and academics. I have been amply rewarded by "the system". But that very system which may shower accolades on a few women is the one which leads to women and other disenfranchised groups being systemically, and systematically, bullied, patronized, neglected and so on. The only way to combat this neglect is through our politics and through the robust ways in which we 'authorize' ourselves.

So how have you authorized yourself?

Well, one way of getting attention from the world—which I myself have used extensively—is to transform yourself into an honorary male. But if we recognize this as a strategic ploy, this transforming yourself into a paradigm of maleness where you wield authority, where you are in a position to create lines, boundaries, censoring mechanisms,

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then maybe we can change things from the inside as well. Take my own situation of being ensconced as a literary critic, a theoretical and cognitive linguist, a poet as well as a teacher—can I as a feminist at least try to influence the way I play these roles so that their contours are radically altered? Take the traditional image of the literary critic—she is described as a dry academic who feeds off the writer, seeks to control her, so the literary critic is seen as a parasite. But in my work I have tried to show how the reviewer can actually be seen as occupying a 'female' altruistic space. Her role can be reconceptualised not as parasitic but nurturing, because it selflessly pays close attention to other writers, cares for them . . . I often produce long reviews of current Indian English writers because I think that even if such activity is regarded as pointless and thankless, it is a kind of moral obligation today to counter the hype these writers often get, in bucketfuls, with painstaking, critical attention. . . Another thing I have tried to do is to introduce a critical vocabulary, a language, that is more suited to an understanding of systemic censorship. For instance, in my recent book, *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch*, I have tried to theorise the idea of indifference that I spoke about earlier, so that we can see it as a kind of matrix concept that colonial and postcolonial patriarchies use to subjugate and contain burgeoning pluralism and difference. In this book I've also taken the forbidden step of analysing my own poetry, introducing it within the context of my critical prose. But—predictably!—this attempt to mix genres has led to that famous charge of narcissism once again! Mixing, like miscegenation, is inherently subversive, I think . . .

In linguistics, which is quite a technical discipline, I have tried to extend the upper bound of analysis—which is usually the grammar of the sentence—to include speech acts such as narrative and translation. One important area in linguistics I have worked in is child language. Here, I have learnt much from children, including my own children, Anka and Viraj. In fact, this business of learning from one's children and one's students is something that I'd especially like to acknowledge . . . because it's a technique I've used a lot. *Technobrat* was a book I actually wrote in collaboration with all my forty-odd students at the IIT—and the two of them who worked most closely with me were my co-authors. As you can imagine this book is a very,

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very polyphonic work, quite difficult to read, but that's because it was meant to address and reconfigure the otherwise very hierarchical *guru-shishya*, teacher-student relationship—so analogous to the man-woman relationship!—not only in its content but also in its *style*. I'm extremely concerned with style because I don't think its function is ornamental. . .

You work in a heavily masculinised environment—IIT. What kind of impact has this had on you?

I'll answer this question a little indirectly. One exam question I sometimes set my students has to do with the goddess Durga. Now Durga carries this *shankhachakra* and other things in her hands, but she still has two of her ten hands free. So what would you put in them? And the IIT students usually give me the same answer: they say an AK 47 or a nuclear bomb. Now this is a typical answer from 90 per cent of students, and I have recorded it again and again. Recently in Gargi College, which is an all-female college, I asked the students the same question since they were commenting on a painting of Bharat Mata who, unlike Durga, held grain in one hand and a book in another, signifying learning, and also other objects signifying nurturing qualities. But when I asked, can you get away from these, too, there was silence. . . When I asked, if you do not want to be confined within an altruistic image where a woman is eternally gentle and sacrificing, and you don't want a Durga wielding an AK 47 in a typically macho manner either, what would you put into those hands instead, there was silence.

None of us women had truly come to grips with this puzzle. That's why I think that perhaps the most dominant metaphor in thinking about women may be neither motherhood nor sexuality nor guilt, but silence. The last poem in *The Ayodhya Cantos* is called "Gargi's Silence". . . Our imaginations are stilled at this point because we haven't been able to imagine what other things we would put into women's hands, all these extra hands of labour which a woman is represented as having. That is the interesting thing, you know, it's the male imagination which is impoverished in this area, but it may be that women, operating in the same space, also have an impoverished

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imagination, so strong is the grip of these stereotypes. This space between the nurturing and self-sacrificing female and the Kali image of extreme violence, that space is the space where I think writing—women's fictions, women's poetry, women's narratives—can make all the difference. Because after all, a woman can be physically raped, her right to speech can be taken away from her, but her writing is an extension of her body into history and, therefore, when we write in force we cannot help but create a new history. The writer's question is: are we also making language, and how? This fight for rights over history—symbolized by the body of one's fiction because it's a projection into time—this is important. So we return to the Utopian questions: where is history located, how does history begin? Who is narrating that history? I think that this projection into history is where women's intellectual activity and their physical life have a sort of continuity. That's why it's not good enough to rely on oral modes of speech, unless we have some way of recording them.

One of the most powerful mediating contexts in the making of history is the home. Many women have said that it's actually the women within the home who are the first censors . . .

I agree with that totally, but I would also say that women are forced to take over this role, it is not that they have a choice about being the first censor. The domain is such that they have to, and so this is not a role which should be looked at unsympathetically because the woman's role *is* to censor and, more importantly, it is a self-protective mode. It's protection the woman offers her children in terms of censorship—and her modes of censorship for son and daughter are different, so she teaches different modes of self-protection, as well. And to the daughter she teaches a range of speech which the daughter can use as armour—so this self-protective nature of censorship is also what we need to theorise and understand. . . We need to protect what we have. I think that censorship within the home has performed a crucial function because it has allowed women to survive until such time as they can give themselves voice; they need to survive at least that initial stage. Now many home environments are very loving, you know, many middle class homes, and those are the typical homes

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which offer crucial leisure time for writing, where the struggle to write is not so apparent. The father is loving, the mother is loving, but there are still censoring devices inside those homes.

In my case, I came from a home where my grandmother was widowed, and she was widowed in very tragic circumstances because she lost her husband, her daughter, her grandchildren in the Bihar earthquake, and she was a young widow. She lived with my parents and with us all her life, and she was a very gentle and educated woman, she read, she was literate. She joked and argued with my sister and brother and myself. At the same time she was a widow and she carried all the self-censoring devices of the widow—she wore white, she didn't eat various types of foods, and she had her own space. Now between her and my mother, who came from Goa, there was some creative tension. It cost my grandmother a great deal of courage to accommodate my mother because she was blamed for letting her only son marry this Goan Christian girl, not just an outsider but from a different community, a different way of living, everything. My mother was a boundary-crosser and my grandmother was a boundary-opener. So, as a child I had two courageous women as very proximate exemplars. The irony was that their common language was English initially, so the tensions between my mother who had come into an alien home, and my grandmother who had lost her home were there, but unspoken. These kinds of tensions, although as a child you do not realize them, they are the most powerful influences in shaping your work. For example, my grandmother used to call me *vidushikanya* which is "the learned girl" and she found this a really funny thing, for a *girl* to be like me, somebody who is absorbed in books. It was a strange thing to be. Now, my mother was very experimental with language and there were all these subtle territorial battles which were being fought linguistically. You know, my mother would use English when she wanted to say certain kinds of things and my grandmother would use Bangla. They each had a whole different language of gestures, different ways of showing affection, different ways of stating boundaries—so all these things formed my personality. The girl child in particular is influenced by these cross-currents, she has her own unspoken questions.

It doesn't have to be an oppressive censorship, but the women

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are the ones who are shaping your relationship to language. People often ask who has influenced your writing, and I think we have a lot of anonymous women who have influenced our writing, not well-known figures, not literary giants, but I would call them the singers of the primal lullabies. . . You know, my mother is very educated but she was always, in a way, language-deprived because she had only one language. She had English and she had to use it, and it was not even her own language because that was Konkani or Portuguese, which she had lost. So she was always in search of innovative languages and she picked up poetry, she picked up bits and pieces and put them to political use because she was involved in the freedom movement, she was spinning khadi, etc. And yet, though she was so innovative, she was such a feisty woman, had such a sense of style and was so very verbal, she never actually wrote anything. Somehow her time, her age censored her, and so perhaps this subterranean impulse for writing fed into me, but it came from all these women who were all writers. Although they didn't write, they have written their lives into me as I see it. I mean, it is to my husband that the *Ayodhya Cantos* is dedicated, and it is my father who read Tagore and Shakespeare to me as a child and has recently done a translation of the *Cantos* into Bengali, and my great debt to these males in my life is public and acknowledged. Yet in a much less obvious, in a subtle and intimate way, the women in my life, my mother, my aunts, my grandmother, have animated my writing. They are the speaking voices in my writing. I really feel they are.

Interviewed by Ritu Menon

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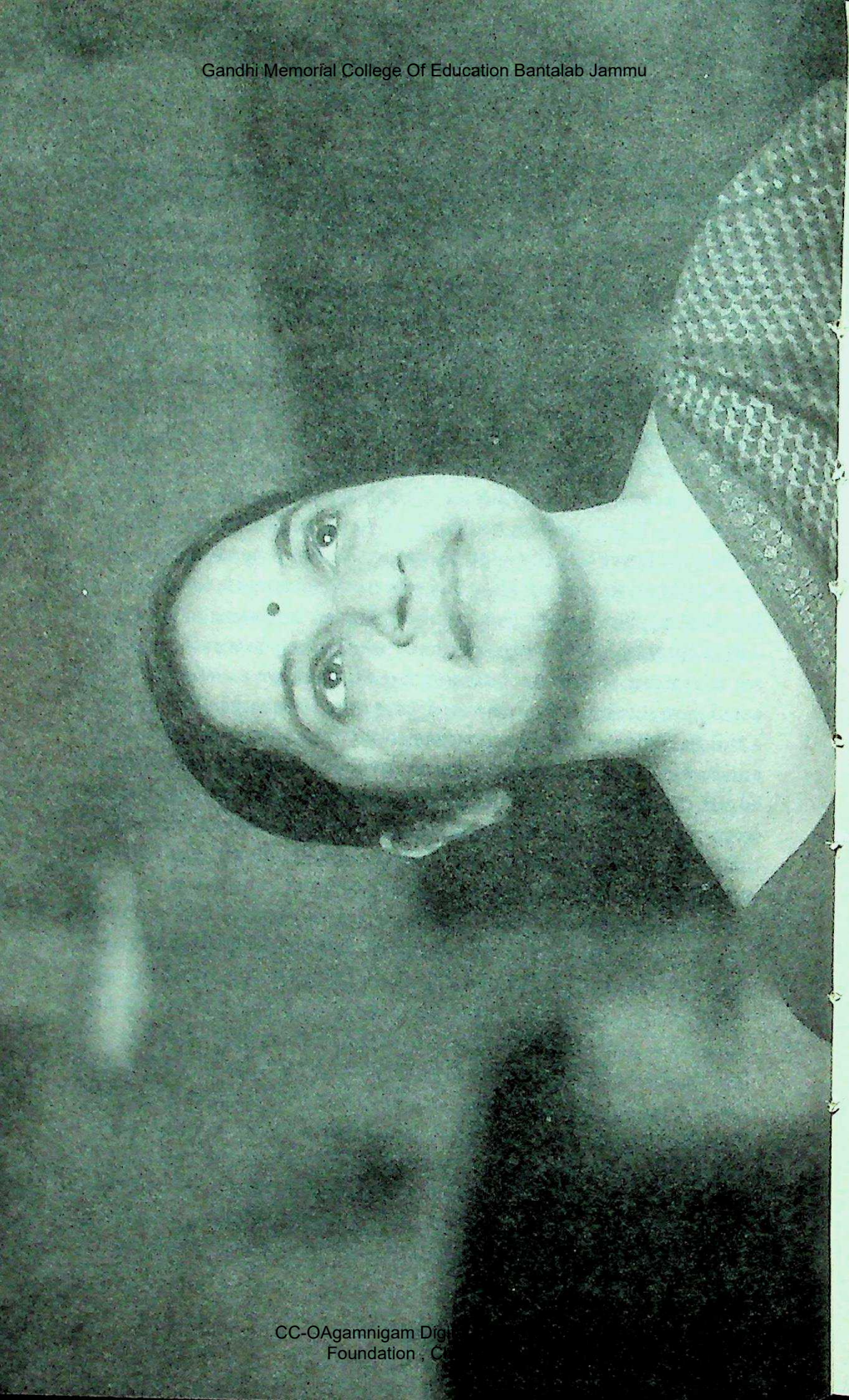

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Volga

Born in Guntur in 1950, educated at the Andhra Christian College, Volga took a Master's degree in Telugu literature from Andhra University. Joining the Student's Federation of India (SFI) she was drawn to the politics of the Naxalbari movement in the 1970s. A member of the Revolutionary Writers' Association, she also joined the civil liberties movement in the early '70s, but moved to feminist politics largely because of very dominant patriarchal attitudes in revolutionary parties.

Volga's significance as a writer may be traced to her introducing a feminist perspective into the literary and political discourse of Andhra Pradesh. Her novel, *Sveccha*, which sold over 50,000 copies marks a watershed in women's writing in Telugu, and is now being published in all Indian languages by the National Book Trust of India. Before it was published, women in Telugu literature had been portrayed only in terms of their family and personal concerns. *Sveccha* was the first novel to look at women's concerns as citizens, and examine the contradictions that arose between their lives as housewives and citizens, as well as at the housewifization of women in political movements. It generated heated debates in literary and political circles in Andhra Pradesh, and was awarded the first prize in the Chatura Novel Competition in 1987.

While *Sveccha* was instrumental in bringing feminist thought to Telugu literature, Volga's anthology of stories, *Rajakiya Kathalu*,

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deals with the oppression of and control over a woman's body, and has paved the way for more openly feminist writing in Telugu. Volga was responsible for organizing the Feminist Study Circle in Hyderabad, and edited the first volume of feminist philosophy in Telugu, *Maku Godalu Levu*. She has also edited an anthology of Telugu poems, *Neeli Meghalu* and co-edited *Sarihaddulu Leni Sandhyalu*, which deals with feminist political praxis in Andhra Pradesh; co-authored *Saramsam* which documents the anti-arrack struggle; and *Mahilavaranam*: *Womanscape*.

Volga's literary activity doesn't stop with the above—she has scripted and co-directed the film, *Thodu* produced by the National Film Development Council (NFDC) for which she received the Nandi Award for Best Writer. She has also scripted and co-directed the children's film, *Patha Nagaram lo Pasivadu* which has won prizes and been acclaimed at national and international film festivals. In 1999 she received the Best Writer Award from Potti Sriramulu Telugu University. Her novels include *Manavi, Sahaja, Akasham lo Sagam, Gulabilu* and *Prayogam*, an anthology of short stories. She has also written the lyrics for *War and Peace*, a Kuchipudi ballet.

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When did you decide to be a writer?

I always wrote, but never thought of it as a career. I wrote mainly because I was very disturbed by social injustice, particularly injustice to women, when I was working in the SFI. There were hardly any women in the organisation so I had no one to share my uneasiness with. The handful who were there didn't care about literature. I had two loves in life—literature and politics, and although I had a sense of companionship in politics, I couldn't share my literary interests with anyone. At the same time my other friends didn't share my political interests—they were simply not interested. I began to write to fill the gap between my social and political interests, and my romantic desires. Although I never thought of myself as a writer my whole life revolved around literature; reading and thinking about it was my passion. My father wanted me to be a doctor but I refused, because I wanted to study literature. My involvement with politics was also very important to me, so the idea that writing could be a career came much later in life.

I've been involved in left politics since I was very young; as a result my literary activity was closely linked to political literary movements. My evolution as a woman writer from within these political literary movements was a process marked by struggle and suffering. It was shaped by political questions and the excitement, the struggle and the joy of discovering myself. From a sense of complete isolation as a woman writer to becoming part of a community was a journey with important social, political and literary implications. Today, I am satisfied with the course of that journey.

When I first began to write poetry, at the age of eighteen or nineteen, I was not aware of myself as a woman writer—I never really thought what being a woman writer meant. The poets who were my role models and inspiration were all male. Women were writing novels in the 1960s and '70s in Telugu, but even as I read their work it didn't occur to me to see how it differed from what men were writing.

So when did you begin writing seriously?

I was very friendly with four poets, one of whom was my classmate. We used to meet often and share our writing with each other, but

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then it occurred to us that perhaps we could publish an anthology of our writing! At that point, although I felt that these friends were good progressive poets with whom it would be okay to publish an anthology, my chief mission was to convert them to Marxism and introduce a political edge into their writing. The Digambara Kavis had just brought out their volume of poems so we called ourselves the Paigambara Kavis* (two of us were Muslim) and published two anthologies! But even then I didn't consider myself a woman writer. Of course this was before Virasam, the Revolutionary Writers' Association was formed, and later three of us became members.

Virasam opened up a whole world of literary friends for me. It was formed in 1970 when it held its first conference. I read a press release about the conference and decided to attend, along with four other poets. In that conference, where all the leading writers and poets of Andhra Pradesh had gathered, I was the only woman present. The fact that I was alone really took me aback. On the one hand were stalwarts like Sri Sri, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, Ravi Sastri, Kalipatnam Rama Rao and K.V. Ramana Reddy, on the other were writers like Varavara Rao and the large group of young poets who were the Digambara Kavulu, and then there was I—alone! I had read and admired all these poets but was suddenly made aware of a great difference and distance between us. There they were, shaking hands, embracing each other, arms around each other's shoulders, in small intimate groups carrying on animated discussions. So much energy and enthusiasm. And there I was—aloof and dignified, a little apart from the rest, smiling. The enthusiasm surrounded me but didn't touch me. My loneliness encircled me like a wall. I realised with a

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* Digambara Kavis: In the period 1967–69, a group of poets who called themselves the DKs published two volumes of poetry. Rejecting the values that had governed poetry till then this group sought to lay bare the rot and corruption in society. Jwalamukhi, Nagamuni,Nikhileshwar, Mahaswapna and Bhairavayya were the Digambara Kavis who caused quite a sensation in literary circles of that period.

Paigambara Kavis: Between 1969–70 a group of five poets from Guntur who called themselves the PKs published two anthologies of poetry. The poets were Sugam Babu, Devipriya, Volga, Kiran Babu and Kamal Kanth. Two of the five were Muslim, and their writing was a reaction to the social conditions of the time.

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shock that within the general category of writers women writers were a minority, but I rationalized it assuming that women hadn't come to the conference basically because they were not interested in revolutionary politics. Yet it was evident that women writers and their work were neither being taken into account nor discussed seriously at the conference.

I wanted to grow as a writer in that Association. I wrote poetry, organized literary meetings, participated in Kavi Sammelans and struggled to obliterate the fact that I was a woman, in spite of my loneliness. It took me a long time to realize how much of my energy, time and creativity were sapped by that struggle. I felt crushed by the contradiction inherent in denying my identity as a woman. My fellow writers had no such problem—they were aware of being men and took pride in that fact. I followed their example and tried walking with them, being like them, for a long time, and they were affectionate, respectful and encouraging towards me. But then something happened.

I moved a resolution that was passed by the Virasam general body. A senior comrade who didn't approve of the resolution said, "The resolution was passed only because Volga is a young woman and all the youth supported her and pushed it through." I was completely shocked. It was as if my gender stood there, blocking my creativity and my intellect, mocking me. Here was I refusing to be conscious of my womanhood, while all these writers were warning each other to watch out for the woman in their midst. Slowly, I noticed other things. If I began to discuss an issue during an executive committee meeting, there would be dead silence. No response. After a few minutes the discussion would continue as if I hadn't spoken at all. I felt that while my poetry was tolerated, the idea of a woman actually entering an area of intellectual debate was intolerable. I left Virasam and joined the Jana Sahithi Samskruthika Samakhya.* There was only one other woman in that organization, but it was so wonderful, a source of such enthusiasm and strength. I could sit next to her, I could whisper my opinions about discussions to her, I could talk freely about certain

* A Left literary organization.

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matters—I could actually tell someone about the problem of having my periods during these meetings! While it was great to discuss literary issues with 25 or 30, sometimes even 100, writers from sunrise to sunset, it was difficult not to be able to ask someone at the end of the day to check whether my sari was stained and where I could buy sanitary napkins. The men, of course, talked freely about their problems, hangovers and headaches, where to buy cigarettes and liquor, etc., but I had to sit calmly as if nothing but the discussions mattered. It was better to be silent than risk saying something that could be misunderstood.

All this began to affect my personality. I grew more restrained, lost all spontaneity and began to edit myself as a matter of habit. That change began to show in my writing. Because I was so conscious of the implicit restraints of modesty and decency there was a drastic change in the style and content of my writing. It was a struggle to get rid of this inhibition, and it took me a long time to even understand where the problem lay.

When did you begin to see yourself as a woman writer?

During a discussion that we had in Jana Sahithi on the writer, Chalam, it suddenly struck me that the problem lay not in the fact that *I was a woman* but that *they were all male.* This was like a great leap forward. From trying hard not to be a woman and accepting these men as exemplary, I had moved to understanding that these men were unreasonable and prejudiced precisely because they were men. This restored my self-confidence and reassured me that the problem was not in *my* radical thinking but in the male writers' conservatism and traditionalism. That was when I began to see myself as a woman, and other women very differently. That difference was immediately reflected in my writing and it changed the very language I used. I left Jana Sahithi and struggled to establish my own literary and political identity, a critical period in my growth as a writer.

My convictions and my political commitment were often questioned. The need for a woman's perspective, however unclear initially, kept haunting me. It was around this time that I thought of writing a book on the Cultural Revolution of China. My marriage and status as the wife of a party member came in the way, not only of this book,

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but of my learning about women's political issues and entering feminist politics. As soon as I realised that women writers are continually obstructed in what they want to write by the fact of their wifehood, I decided to give up being a wife.

After this I declared I was a feminist and began to write more than ever before. My second novel, *Sveccha,* won a prestigious prize and generated a lot of discussion, raised a lot of questions about the position of women in the political circles and revolutionary movements of Andhra. I also knew that it would bring the issue of women's freedom into the agenda of revolutionary movements. What I didn't expect was that the novel would dig up details of my personal life and make them part of these discussions. I was completely unprepared. It's always painful when a writer's personal life is discussed in the same minute detail as her novel—but it never happens to men, who transcend their personal lives when they enter literature. Women's writing is always seen to be intimately bound to their personal lives, and it is this fear that makes them consciously distance their writing from their lived experience because everyone takes an unhealthy interest in dissecting and discussing a woman writer's life. In literary meetings, civil liberties meetings, revolutionary meetings, *Sveccha* was discussed threadbare—and so was my irresponsibility in deserting a husband who was a revolutionary leader, in search of an illusory freedom. This was the main thrust of the discussions. Many people were furious—my life was measured against the novel and the novel measured against my life. For nearly one year I was plagued by the need to *prove* that I was a good woman even though, deep down, I knew that this wasn't necessary. There was no way out except to write. I wrote steadily—novels, stories, translations, feminist theory. Some of us formed a Feminist Study Circle and began to publish books. When I translated Alexandra Kollantai's *Three Generations*, there were more discussions. Everyone questioned the relevance of such a story at that point of time. Why did you write this? Who is that character? Why did you translate this? Why did you use this word?

Have I been able to write exactly as I have wanted to, about everything I have wanted to? No. After the storm that *Sveccha* raised there was a change in my writing that I cannot explain or identify easily. Gradually I began to justify my characters. Whenever I created

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a woman who defied tradition I was at pains to make her an ideal human being, honest, good and perfect in every respect. But there was no need to do that because there are bound to be flaws in each character. My characters suffer as a result of my erasing these flaws, presenting only perfection. I know this, but still change the character in order to justify her defiance of tradition, make her acceptable. Often this has happened without any clear intention on my part, and I realise that this is a consequence of personalized attacks on me. I didn't want my characters or people who were like them, defying tradition, to suffer the same fate. When I want to present an idea the protagonist is or has to be flawless—I think that is the result of my political training and ideology, the conviction that the one who points the way should be flawless.

I also tend to make my women characters very modest and responsible. Although I realise that this lack of weaknesses and flaws make my characters less rich and rounded, I would still go ahead and try to legitimize their defiance of tradition by making them acceptable in every other way. In a sense this also makes that act of defiance acceptable. Later I wonder why I made them so respectable. So I'm ambivalent. If this was the case with a single character it wouldn't matter, but it worries me that all my characters are the same. This modesty has become a compulsion. I don't know why—perhaps because of having moved with famous people from a very young age, always having to sound mature, intellectual and modest at the same time. That conditioning affects my writing—I can't bear vulgarity—it has become a part of me. The irony, of course, is that with that kind of conditioning and background I was sucked into a storm of gossip and cast out on the streets, exposed to a harsh public gaze. My morals were analysed publicly. The puritanism of political circles is of course gendered—the same values are not applied to men in the movement. I was torn between trying to put my life in order and coping with public trials and enquiries. This became a heavy burden for me, but maintaining the burden of that modest, mature and intellectual stance then became a habit, a matter of survival. Come to think of it, although I have often wondered whether this hampered my writing, I realise it may also have been what saved me and preserved my dignity. In one sense though, I haven't been able to transcend myself or

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these inhibitions in my writing. That disturbs me, yet at the same time increases my acceptability. This is a real source of irritation.

How do you see the growth of women's writing?

Many women dislike the term, woman writer, but one fine day they become aware of the fact that they are writing as *women.* One reason why they resist this label is because they are never accorded the status they deserve in literature. The field of literature has been *appropriated* by famous men, only their writing and history are available to us as students of literature. The primary impression and influence on us is of men's writing. Their lives, their stories and their view of culture seep into a woman's consciousness from a tender age. So it's difficult, almost unnecessary, for a woman writer to distinguish herself, cut the cord that binds her to that precious heritage. Even if she succeeds in making that break, women have no specific historical or cultural space that they can claim as their own. They seem suspended, without any firm support. Naturally women writers are apprehensive about leaving this familiar, accepted literary space to venture forth into an alien territory where they really do not know what lies in store.

In the '80s the women's movement, together with the emergence of identity politics, was one of the factors that brought women's writing to the forefront, so that it began to gain recognition and carve a space for itself in literature. Gradually, the number of writers who identified themselves as *women* writers began to write poetry in Telugu. In the late '80s there was a profusion of feminist poetry; the fact that women were writing powerful poems about their reality was something that most male poets couldn't accept. A concerted attack on the women began. Although women's bodies, and a description of women's bodies, have been central to poetry from ancient times, the fact that women were writing about their own bodies and bodily functions became gross and unbearable to men. They called it various names—poetry of prostitution, full of body consciousness but no social consciousness, blue (pornographic) poetry, and so on. The women poets felt besieged and isolated even though they were being attacked collectively. It was then that Asmita (a resource centre for women) brought all the women poets together in a workshop where they could share their experiences and discuss strategies to deal with

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this. In October 1992 women writers from every corner of Andhra Pradesh came to Hyderabad in response to our invitation, and for the first time women writing in different environments and contexts met as a group. The total isolation that I had experienced in 1970 in a conference of revolutionary writers was finally wiped out in 1992. I was proud of being a woman writer. That gathering gave everyone new strength. The women discussed the questions, doubts and fears that haunted them. Many of them who had stopped writing for fear of censure were encouraged to write again as a result. Two days passed discussing the language and content of our writing. Within a year *Neeli Meghalu,* an anthology of women's poetry, was published which made for a dramatic shift in our position as women writers and brought women's writing centre-stage.

To be a woman writer does not mean only to write about women's concerns—there is that misconception in popular perception. It is important to see things from a women's perspective, to bring a fresh point of view and new insights to one's subject. As women we write about everything under the sun and recognize that we have the authority and opportunity to do so. That we have a right to the opportunity, to fight for that right. Although the struggle often brings suffering there is also the satisfaction of knowing that we are struggling for our identity and our right. And that is the ultimate source of our satisfaction.

What are the obstacles you face as a writer?

If I think about the process of writing and of what comes between me and my pen and paper, I will say time and space. When do I write? Except for dawn and midnight, there is always work to do. Housework, office work, children's education, parents' ill health, all impinge on my writing. One can count on one's fingers the times one has been able to write with one's entire mind and energy, and even then I chose poems and short stories which need less time to reflect on. There are some stories that lie incomplete for months and years. And this is in spite of the fact that my home environment does not discourage my writing. Space is always a problem. There are usually one or two writing tables in any house, but even that is difficult in small houses. When the table is free, I am not; when I am free the

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table is being used by the children or other adults. Often the dining table comes to my rescue, but sometimes I have to vacate even that table suddenly, in the middle of my writing.

Are there some things you can't write about?

I am constantly surprised by the fact that I find it difficult to write about something very close to me—it could just be my weakness as a woman, but I cannot write about my political experiences. Every time I try it is as if I am tearing myself apart. I also find it difficult to write about motherhood. Maybe because I haven't sorted out the various complex strands involved to be able to write about it. I need to be clear on an issue, I need answers before I can write freely—that is a personal thing.

I have always wanted to research an area thoroughly and then write about it, but the time and resources to do that are scarce. This is a problem for many women writers. The thought of leaving home, work and family to concentrate on a book is thrilling but unreal, like a dream. Especially for middle class women writers who are past forty.

After *Sveccha* and the attack on me there has been no occasion when I have felt happy about my writing. I write because I don't want to stop. Once something is printed I don't look at it again. I have no desire to read it, or take pleasure in it, or share my pleasure with friends. Once a story is published it is like knowing the curd has set. Nothing special. Prizes and awards only create a further sense of insecurity and a loss of enthusiasm. They cannot bring joy. I am afraid that this loss of joy will affect my writing—that thought haunts me constantly.

Interviewed by Vasanth Kannabiran

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Pradnya Lokhande

PRADNYA LOKHANDE (b. 1969) is among the most acclaimed of today's young Marathi poets. The first poem she ever wrote "with any kind of seriousness" she says, was during her high school years in Mumbai, and it is significant that it spoke about a woman's oppression and her struggle for freedom. Since then, Pradnya recalls, "the poems just flowed out in a gush from somewhere inside. . ." This gush of creativity has been unabated for nearly two decades, producing remarkable work most of which is contained in her two published anthologies.

This interview was conducted over two lengthy meetings with Pradnya at her home in Thane near Mumbai, where she lives with her husband and their endearing 10-year-old son. One of the first things that struck me about the compact, book-lined drawing room where we settled down to talk, was the almost tangible presence of her father in the various memorabilia placed around the room. A large poster on the wall with quotations from his autobiography, a national award that he received displayed prominently, another state award in another corner, his books taking pride of place . . .

During his lifetime Pradnya's father, Daya Pawar, was a prominent Dalit writer and activist. It became evident as I spoke to her that he has left indelible impressions on his daughter—on her thoughts, on her writing, on her entire worldview. Pradnya has carved out a very distinct niche as a Dalit woman poet:

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while being intensely conscious of her caste identity she has yet broken out of the many constraints prescribed by this very identity, giving expression to the woman's voice. As a result, her poetry has often been criticized by male Dalit writers as being "not Dalit enough". But braving all accusations and censure, Pradnya writes on, honest and true to her own convictions.

Today she stands at a critical juncture in her career as a writer where she feels that what she has to say can no longer be contained in the genre of poetry. She feels intensely the need for a change in style, language and idiom. What that new chosen genre will be she doesn't know; what she does know is that she has lots more to say and, therefore, write she must . . .

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Your father's centrality to your life is quite evident just by looking around this room. Has your writing been as clearly marked by his influence?

I think I get my sensitivity more from my father than from my mother. And, yes, I am vastly influenced by Dada's total personality. I always found him a tremendously attractive person—the way he spoke, the way he behaved, the way he was . . . I compared him to other men, other fathers, and he always emerged the best. You could say there's a father fixation here! I would spend hours talking to him and it was always a dialogue. He had this ability to look at one issue from many different perspectives and that made him multi-dimensional. I think I must have subconsciously tried to imbibe a lot of these qualities which I admired in him.

Over the years, many Dalit writers became one-dimensional, rigid, isolated—often restricting their writing to sloganeering and diatribe. Dada never did, not in his writings; not as a human being. Yet he never forgot his Dalit roots. He held on to the reality of being Dalit in our society but tried to find ways of connecting to a variety of realms and worlds even through this. He was always open—open to ideas, to thoughts, to philosophies, and he was never dismissive of any ideology. While he was very much an integral part of the Dalit struggle he was never really with any political wing like the Dalit Panthers. This enabled him to see things rather more objectively than most and because of this, I think, he grew as a person as well.

This breaking away from caste restrictions is possibly the largest influence emanating from my father's personality that has affected my writing.

Does this mean that you have surpassed your caste consciousness—or is it that because you live in a city and belong to a younger generation, the consciousness is not as acute?

Oh no, no. There was no getting away from caste even for my generation and even though we lived in a metropolis. Caste confronted me from my very childhood, through so many petty incidents. We lived in a chawl (tenement) and there was a family living close by—the Surves—a Maratha family. There was a community tap where we had to go to get water for our household needs—two taps on either side

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of a small wall. I was very young then but I could understand the fights that would take place over water at these taps. Whenever we went to fill water other families would remark: "These low-caste people have come." My mother used to get very angry. Once some women even told her that she was not to come anywhere near the taps while they were filling their water because she would contaminate them. At first my mother stayed quiet but then things began to get unbearable. For instance, while she would be filling drinking water they would deliberately dirty our water, so she began to retaliate and they beat her up. It was nightmarish. Turned into a police case. Can you imagine, this happened in urban Bombay during the early 1970s, at a time when my father was already a well-known writer and had received a central government award for his work! This was one agonizing experience.

The other experience that I will never forget was with our Gujarati neighbours. Those days we used to get bottled milk with a tin foil seal. We would take two bottles of milk daily but that used to be a little more than our requirements. So the woman next door said that she would take half a bottle from us daily as they needed that much more. Ironically, she never drank tea at our house. One day we asked her to explain the logic behind this and she said that if she ate or drank anything prepared in our house it would contaminate her, but milk that came from outside and was sealed and in a glass bottle could not contaminate! These two incidents left a very deep impression in my mind.

Did things improve over the years?

My mother taught in a primary school at Andheri and my father had a job with the railways so, gradually, our financial situation improved. Whenever we got new clothes or bought new things for the home our neighbours would wonder how Dalits could afford to buy things. When I began attending college I had this very close friend whose mother was the headmistress at a school. Like all Indians, we too traditionally offered sweets to friends at Diwali. By this time my father's autobiography, *Baluta*, had been published and widely acclaimed. He had also received a Ford Foundation grant for some more work. So although our surname, Pawar, is also a Maratha (upper caste) sur-

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name, it was no secret that we were Dalits. The day after Diwali my friend came to me in tears and told me that when our Diwali sweets went to their house, her mother warned everyone in the family not to eat them and then threw them all into the dustbin. My friend just could not believe that her mother, a highly educated woman, the headmistress of a school, would behave in such a manner. So you see caste consciousness was not something one could stay away from . . . whether one wanted to or not, one was made intensely aware of being Dalit.

When you first began writing, was this agony reflected in your poems?

The first poem I wrote with any kind of seriousness was when I was in high school. It just came to me spontaneously one day and I have included it in my first collection. It was a poem called *Kokila* (The Koel) and it's interesting that even at that young age it spoke about a woman's suffering. About a woman being caged and how she would not tolerate this any more and would soon break out of her cage and seek freedom. Everyone around was thrilled that I had written a poem—especially my father. On hindsight it surprises me how these thoughts came to my mind. Perhaps it was a reflection of what I saw around me. Living in a Bombay chawl it was impossible to ignore the oppression of women in the families around me. I must have been absorbing all their suffering even if I did not understand too much of it, and that agony must have touched a nerve within somewhere.

After that the poems just flowed out in a gush from somewhere inside me, and by the time I reached college I had quite a collection of them. Some were printed in college magazines and in a quarterly called *Asmita Darsha*—a magazine very closely connected to the Dalit struggle and a forum for Dalit literature. This was the magazine that first published many Dalit poets and writers. I was very keen that my poems be published here.

Were you ever troubled by the thought that perhaps your work was being published because you were Daya Pawar's daughter?

Of course, initially I was concerned that perhaps I am being published because I am my father's daughter, but I soon got over this

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apprehension. Dada helped by telling me that many of his poems had been rejected, but whenever I sent my poems anywhere they were always accepted and published. *Anushthubh*, a very serious, academic and literary bimonthly also accepted my poems very early on. By then my father had convinced me that in this field, unless you have promise, nobody publishes your work because you happen to be somebody's daughter or wife or sister. They may publish you once but will not continue to publish your work unless it is good. So I was quite convinced of my worth!

Where did this gush of poetry spring from?

I was the eldest child in the family. I was also the introvert among my siblings so I had a tendency to dwell on painful experiences that I went through and also to be hurt intensely by them. I was a loner and normally quite deeply absorbed in books. Other than that, I was always fascinated by the discussions that Dada would have with the various writers, artists, activists who streamed in to meet him. So in a way I was steeped in this world of writing and books and intense discussion, and then my own experiences further honed this interest. I think that's how my poetry came into being.

There is, of course, a lot on a woman's suffering because of her caste in my collection of poems. But over the years I progressed from that point to a stage where my poetry looks at the wider suffering—or situation—of women, even apart from caste. This is a development that is quite distinct in my book, *Anthastha*. So in this collection you see poems on love and longing, a poem on Ameena, one on Roop Kanwar, and another on film-maker Mira Nair after seeing and being intensely moved by *Salaam Bombay*. One of my favourites is a poem on Yashodhara, Buddha's wife. It's actually a poem addressed to Buddha which asks:

You came to her door, transformed and mightier than the sky
You stood before her with your hand outspread in benediction
But did you, Siddhartha, even look at her eyes which brimmed over
With unquenchable thirst?

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When and why did this shift from a focus on caste take place? Was it consciously done?

I have no clear idea when this transition—or what I see as progress—from caste-based oppression to the more basic suffering or situation of women as a whole, happened. But happen it did! I think it coincided with moving out of my home in Bombay and into a hostel in Nasik. It was in Nasik that I did my last three years of college. My mother was my father's second wife and I had a half-sister from his first marriage who lived in Nasik. In my last year of school I fell ill with typhoid and when the doctor suggested a change of climate for me, we thought Nasik would be a practical choice since my half-sister and her husband were there to look after me. I think when one is alone one tends to turn inwards even more. In many ways my life changed drastically with this move. I developed a keen interest in theatre and I started acting in plays. I also began writing in prominent local newspapers and edited some of their special Diwali magazines. It was a strange and contradictory development, in that I grew into more of an introvert and yet my social circle expanded. In those three years I really matured as a person and from this, possibly, came my newer poems.

And what kind of poetry was this?

Well, one way of putting it is that my poems—especially my recent poems—are not regarded as 'Dalit poetry'. This has, of course, left me open to intense criticism from Dalit society. When I began writing it was never consciously as a particular brand of poetry. My only aim was to liberate myself by saying what I wanted to say, and it emerged as poetry. I got married quite early and the pages of my diary began filling up rapidly with more and more poetry. I never once thought about whether or not this would be considered Dalit poetry by anyone.

Then my first collection was published and it was extremely well received. Renowned writers like Vasant Bapat and Shirish Pai praised my work when the book was launched. Today, when I look back on it, I think it's significant that almost all of them claimed that my

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poetry marked the next phase of Dalit poetry . . . or that this was the dawn of Dalit poetry, that my work had crossed the threshold of earlier boundaries and moved ahead. It was seen as Dalit youth emerging with its own identity and my poetry was symbolic of that freshness, that new look at old concepts. At that time I was overjoyed to hear all this said about my writing but later, sadly, my own generation rejected my work saying it was not Dalit poetry at all. The language of my poetry is calm and collected; it is not strident. So this, too, was criticized and people said that my language did not reflect any of the struggles or trials and tribulations of Dalits. My argument to this was, how can I reproduce the kind of writing that was produced by the first generation of Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal or Baburao Gabul? Their perceptions were very different from mine. The severe injustice, the unrelenting discrimination that they went through in their rural settings were not what I had experienced at all. I had 'seen' those horrifying incidents only through the stories told to us by the old women in our families. But yes, I had experienced caste discrimination despite living in a metropolis. I, too, had been burnt by this invisible injustice but it was of a different kind and a different intensity. So perhaps my poetry seems to them to be more in keeping with middle class values.

When I won an award for young writers in Pune, Shantabai Shelke and Lakshman Mane were the chief guests. Lakshman Mane said that there were heaps of women writing the kind of poetry I wrote, and that I should be writing something that was more genuine, more real. At this point Shantabai Shelke spoke up and said that they should not be compartmentalizing poets in this manner—who were they to decide who should write what kind of poetry? I still remember, she said very forcefully: "Pradnya must write the kind of poetry she wants to write. Pradnya belongs to the new generation and has her own identity. If people like us start prescribing to her, it will surely stifle her creativity, warp her identity . . ."

How do you react to these expectations from different sections of society? Have you ever consciously or otherwise tried to change your writing in order to conform to 'expectations'?

Personally, I have reached a stage where I find that the do's and don'ts

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that Dalit society places on Dalit writers are far too constricting for creative writing. Quite apart from what you are allowed to write and the perspectives you can and cannot take, there is the whole question of language. Anything that is even remotely connected linguistically to Hindu or Brahmanical concepts is totally unacceptable. So I cannot use words like *veda, atma,* etc. if I want my writing to be acceptable to Dalit society. I find myself beginning to rebel against these externally imposed restrictions that make me lose my spontaneity as a creative woman writer. When I want to publish the many poems that I have written about the man-woman relationship, must I think a million times about whether or not they will fit into the Dalit concept of poetry? That's very stifling. Do Dalits not have relationships—or fall in love?

Ironically, my father who was such an acclaimed Dalit writer never once hinted to me that I should be writing a particular kind of poetry. In my time I have written a lot of love poetry, a lot of poems based on the many aspects of man-woman relationships . . . but he never ran them down or asked me why I did not write more 'meaningful' poetry. In fact, I think he used to feel that at the time I wrote these poems, they were genuine because they came from the heart. He never ever suggested that I change even a single word in my poems. To him my poetry was mine. He never urged me to write poetry of protest or revolt so that I could carve a niche in Dalit society or attain a certain kind of legitimacy as a Dalit poet. He believed that Dalit sensibility is not at all narrow, that it must connect with the totality. And, finally, that whatever one does, there has to be a basic humanity, tolerance, sympathy.

So I've been criticized among Dalit litterateurs, but I know that I will never write because I want approval from any one person or any one section of society—even if it is from my own caste. I have always written and will continue to write as I want—because if I don't write I cannot rest in peace.

Much of your poetry comments on the suffering of women as a whole, including Dalit women. How do Dalit men react to this?

I have noticed that when I speak openly at any public forum Dalit men are not comfortable with what I say. They claim that Dalit woman

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was never oppressed by men; that because she had to step out of the home to earn her livelihood she was never suppressed. So she was far more revolutionary than her sisters from other castes. But I have a slightly different perspective on this. Unfortunately, as Dalit society began to move upwards, as it began to get more educated, the more educated and well placed among my caste also took on upper middle class and brahmanical values. And this itself has led to Dalit women being in the same situation as most other women in our society. Today, the Dalit man's perception of, and attitude towards, women is much the same as any other man's. He may.be involved in a social struggle for his caste, but I do know that Dalit women who have gained any prominence in any field today face a lot of oppression in their own homes from their own men. I can understand if this was happening to the earlier generation of Dalit women, but it's tragic that it is happening with Dalit women of my generation, too. And if these women cannot move beyond a certain position it is because most of their energies are expended in their homes and for their families—like most other men Dalit men, too, expect this of their women.

Do you find this happening in your own life, too?

I got married in 1988 at the age of 20. I wrote a lot after marriage, and in 1993 I published my first anthology of poetry. But now, after having achieved a certain prominence in the literary world, little accusations have begun—such as, I don't give enough time and attention to my home and child. For instance, if my little son doesn't do well enough in school it's because I had to attend a particular seminar or conference when I should have been helping him with his studies! It's very difficult for families to understand the totality of a woman—especially a woman writer—and appreciate the coexistence of a variety of dimensions to her life with which she is eternally struggling.

Since my father died in 1996 I've been through an extremely difficult phase. As long as he was alive I felt that there was a kind of protection for me, for my writing and related activities. But ever since he died I have begun feeling very vulnerable. What never fails to astonish me is that men get married with the very clear idea that they want their wives to be different, not run of the mill housewives, but once married, they find it difficult to accept the very qualities that

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make their wives different. So now this whole concept of relationships and how they change; what is the basis of a relationship, etc., this is what I want to explore and write about. And this is a subject that goes beyond the poetic form.

When my father died, the responsibility of his entire world shifted onto my shoulders because people saw Pradnya as the person who would carry the mantle of Daya Pawar. Because of this the demands on my life and time—even from my mother—increased a hundredfold. Now even she says that I should commit myself to only those activities which my husband approves of. That if he is against something I do then I should give that up. And then, of course, there are the usual expectations of my role as wife and mother. Sometimes I feel that I should just leave all this and go and live alone. I wonder when I'll ever be able to do what I want and not what I should because I am a daughter, a mother, a wife. As a writer this often becomes unbearable.

Coming back to your poems, which are some of your favourites?
My most favourite poem—more than just a favourite, it is a very significant one for me—is the one about my father called, "You are My Father". This shatters the traditional Indian family's concept of the father figure and claims him as a friend. My other favourite, "Vithabai", is one that I wrote very recently about a woman from a *tamasha* (folk-dance) group. Let me give you the background to this. My paternal grandfather was an accomplished musician with a *tamasha* troupe—this was almost a family tradition until my father got educated and realised that this folk-dance form thoroughly exploited women and that the upper castes looked down on it. So he turned his back on *tamasha*. I had heard a bit about this world of *tamasha* dancers from my father, and some of it I read about and studied. I met some of these women and became quite interested in their lives. What was significant was that not only did these women keep the folk dance and music tradition alive for many years (and their reputations were sullied in the bargain), but entire families depended on their earnings through the *tamasha*—the men simply lived off them. My poem "Vithabai" emerged from this.

Another poem that is special for me is "Muktabai". This is about

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the sister of the renowned Maharashtrian saint, Dnyaneshwar. Dalit writers totally reject all devotional literature, but I was fascinated by Muktabai's whole journey towards spiritual knowledge and her shedding of all physical needs on her path to this goal. You might well ask why I write about such 'non-Dalit' subjects—I think one of the reasons is that my reading has been immense and, much like my father, I have connected with a very wide variety of people, regardless of caste and creed. This has broadened my canvas, expanded my entire vision. Much of my poetry talks about the different facets of womanhood, whether I'm writing about Vithabai, Muktabai or my mother . . .

And what are your plans for the future? A third anthology?
Actually, no. I have almost certainly decided to turn towards prose now. It's just that I'm not getting the time and space to pursue this. I think much of what I wanted to say through poetry is already included in my second anthology and now there is a kind of break in my writing. That is not to say that I will not write; it's just that I feel the time has come for me to change my genre. I feel, increasingly, that what I want to say now cannot be contained in the form of poetry any more. If I write poetry in the future it will only be when I feel I have crossed my earlier boundaries of content and style. I am now so familiar with my style that it comes far too easily to me, and that's not good. I need to break that pattern; to strive, to struggle for a new and different style and content to emerge. I often feel that I want to write just one poem—an epic poem—that will say all that I want to.

One theme that haunts me and is waiting to emerge is a journey to my roots—going back with three generations of women in my family, in my caste. My grandmother, who is still alive, often narrates horrifying stories and experiences of what these women suffered, not just from the upper castes but even at the hands of Dalit men. And yet it is so obvious to me that all our Dalit men who have been prominent in the struggle, who are writers and political leaders, owe all this to women of my mother's and grandmother's generation. They are the ones who nurtured, fed and clothed them through the most terrifying and trying circumstances imaginable. I want to write about all this, perhaps as a novel. But the language, the form, the structure, the

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idiom . . . all of this will have to work out just right and I'm still not sure how that will happen. It will need time and the kind of mental space that allows for total involvement.

Why would this need more involvement and space than your poetry?

Writing poetry is quite different. Mostly poems come to you quite quickly. Of course, there are the rare ones that really torture you! They just spin around in your head but refuse to flow out in black and white onto paper. Often what happens is that what you want to say is one thing but the poem that finally emerges is something else!

Quite honestly, I feel that at least among Marathi writers, women poets have not yet reached that pinnacle of strength which some of our male poets have achieved, like Namdeo Dhasal, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolhatkar and others. Perhaps women will grow to this in some years, and maybe it has to do with the different levels and forms of censorship they experience, but at the moment they do not have that strength. In my opinion, the only woman writer in Marathi who comes close to reaching this strength of conviction is Mallika Amar Sheikh. Mallika has a tremendous openness in her writing, and what makes her stand out is that she is not doing it merely to be bold or for effect, or because it is a trendy thing to do. With her it becomes part of her totality as a woman; it's an integral part of her. With all honesty I must say that no Dalit woman writer has that strength, that courage, in her writings.

Perhaps this is the reason why, more than contemporary Marathi women writers, I have been inspired by women in other languages like Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai. I often wish I could write like them. In Marathi literature, more than contemporary writers, I find inspiration in the works of poet saints like Janabai and Bahinabai. For their times, they were truly revolutionary.

And this is one reason why writing prose will be far more difficult than writing poetry. In prose there is no ambiguity of any kind. I will need to have the strength to strip many things bare; I cannot camouflage them through language. That's why it will need more space and total involvement.

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All said and done, and at the end of the day, do you think of yourself as a Dalit poet?

(*Smiles, a little guiltily*) No. I think of myself as a woman poet, but an integral part of that is that I *am* a Dalit. I sometimes feel that if I was born to another caste I would have written far, far more and far more freely. Today I feel that I have crossed that caste boundary in my poetry, but it will be much more difficult if I try to write prose. I will become much more conscious of the imposed restrictions and constraints.

But then my writing has always been born of restlessness. The times when I'm terribly distressed and disturbed are when I've done my best work. That is possibly why these three years have been very significant for me and my writing. Perhaps the urge behind a woman writing is different from that behind men's writing . . .?

Interviewed by Gouri Salvi

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Anamika

ANAMIKA (b. 1961) is one of the brightest young stars in the Hindi literary firmament. Poet, essayist, translator, novelist, academic, she has been preoccupied with issues of language, form and feminist criticism both as a creative writer and as a teacher. As a critic, she has written on the metaphysical poets and the Moderns; on women's writing, French feminism, myth and literature. As a poet her work dwells on deep silences and women's condition.

Anamika has said that in her 15 years of writing experience as a poet and essayist, she has imposed a kind of "spiritual dieting" on herself. She speaks eloquently of the "needle and thread" syndrome in women's lives, keeping their lips properly sealed, observing a stern "aesthetics of silence". For middle class women like her this aesthetics has been particularly oppressive. What are we so ashamed of and why? Who are we hiding from? she asks. Family honour, the compulsion to be a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother locked her into the "good girl syndrome". She tried to find role models in early women's writing and turned to women in her own family. She discovered that they all wrote furiously, but the values of forbearance and patience, of restraint and refinement had paralysed them.

"My aunts, buas, chachis, masis wrote letters that they never posted. One of them wrote directly to god, but they remained in

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a half-way house, between private and public. The feminine mystique created around this was really detrimental to my writing. I felt I was caught in a plot not of my making—I was acculturated to believe that it is only the second-rate, the underclass, who 'speak'—the very young, the aged, prostitutes, witches and slave girls." Even now, she says, she cannot write directly about religion, politics or personal relationships, and the fear of hurting others by exposing oppression, remains.

Anamika has published two poetry anthologies, *Samay ke Shahar Mein* (In the City of Time); and *Beejakshar* (Seed-word); two novellas, and a collection of short stories. She is the recipient of several awards, among them the Rashtrabhasha Award (1987) for her novel; the Bharatbhushan Award for her poetry (1996); the Girija Mathur Samman (1998), the Sahityakar Samman (1998); and the Parampara Samman (2001). Most recently she was awarded the Munmun Sarkar Puraskar (2003).

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Anamika, when did you begin to write or feel that this was something you would like to do?

When I was very young. I was not conscious of the potential—but you know, I felt very lonely, I was a very lonely child. My parents were very busy, my brother was in a famous residential school miles away, we had a very huge house and I led a very isolated kind of life. There was a very rich library that I was provided with and I was told many stories, every night. My father made it a point to come and spend a few hours with me at night, but all day I was by myself. My mother taught in the university, she was very caring, but she had a very large house to look after and a large family of cousins, distant relatives and family friends. She was always to be found doing something or the other for someone or the other.

There was a gulmohur tree in front of my window and, you know . . . I felt like communicating to it. It was basically out of books that I read . . . all the characters in those books became the permanent citizens of my imagination.

How old were you at this time?

Oh, all this was before I was twelve.

Before twelve?

(*Long pause.*) Well, I was always a bit precocious. And all those characters, they seemed to fill me up, their problems, they all seemed to be living with me. And then others who were close to us, I would listen to their stories, their pain, and it was like a parallel world. I didn't know whose agony I was experiencing. I was very close to the women, midwives and others, who came home—my mother was quite altruistic—some had lost their homes, needed a loan, all sorts of women, I kept talking to them. Not as a child, because I was quite isolated, but later on when I was in my teens, I started sitting with them. I wrote about them in my diary, "My Little Women." My own parents were very happily married, they were very well adjusted, but there were all types of couples in my family and I saw quite a lot of tension among them. . . One of my aunts—

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The one who wrote to god?

Yes. My mother used to tell us about how they spent their childhood and this aunt was in the middle—the third sister. So, you know how the eldest or the youngest are the loved ones, the middle ones are slightly neglected, and she had a very poor constitution so she was the one who kept writing to god... Then one day Mother discovered that she had gone all the way to the cross-roads to post her letter to god! Mother went after her and . . .

How old would she have been at that time?

She must have been 9 or 10. (*Laughs*) Anyway, I was very close to women, and I wanted to write about them.

So when did you begin writing?

I began then, with nature poems, because my mind was full of the Himalayas and poetic images, but prose writing in which you express your anguish, that I began in my teens . . .

People say that poetry is the medium for teenage sorrow—is it not like that?

Ever since I was a teenager a sense of melancholy has been part of my make-up. I felt bad for everyone who reached out to me in sorrow. Through prose I used to communicate the details of a broken family, for instance, or the agonies women talked about, their sufferings . . . women whom I knew, women in distress. One of them even said afterwards, you write my story. I started with that, at her request. One day, by chance, I discovered a class-mate of mine, a girl who used to sit on the bench next to me, on my way to an aunt's in-laws who stayed beyond the red-light area. I saw my classmate—standing with all these ghungroos on her feet, still in her school uniform. Sad and tired . . .

Amla was such a quiet creature, apologetic about her whole being. Thank god she didn't know that I knew . . . but later I wrote a full-length novella woven around her character.

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What was your story called?

"Par Kaun Sunega?" (But Who Will Listen?) I was old enough to guess why she was standing there, why she was out at this time of the evening. But it was so sad, such a pathetic scene—in her school-dress, she had taken her socks off, and she looked so tired. It affected me deeply but I wasn't able to speak about it. I was absolutely silent. Horrified. Even now I feel such regret that I couldn't . . . didn't . . . reach out to her.

Did you ever talk to your mother about this, ever share these things you were haunted by?

Because I couldn't talk about these things I started writing about them. I was very close to Mother, but there were some experiences I just couldn't share with her.

But when your story was published, would she have read it?

They (my parents) did read it, but they said: how did you write this, was it based on something you read? . . . They kept wondering, but . . . I still haven't told them the real story. I was so close to my mother, she was my best friend, but I don't know what stopped me, I couldn't tell her. I was afraid she would feel very unhappy. There were many such instances, many things that troubled me, and perhaps if I had confided in my parents things would have been easier. But I decided, I don't know why, that I had to deal with them myself. And perhaps I was also being protective of them.

But you continued to write . . .

I did. I continued to write, but some things I destroyed because Ma would read my diary sometimes, and I thought she would ask if this was based on a true experience. And then I would have to explain it all to her—

Better to erase it—

Well, there was the diary and other writings also. How did you think of all this? Where did you gather this from? What is it all about? I didn't want to talk about it.

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You have said that you derive some inspiration from Bhakti poetry because you find in it the virtues of silence and obliqueness. Is this more true of your poetry than of your prose?

Yes, because in a story you have greater freedom. It's a narrative form, you could be telling anybody's story. Poetry is supposed to be personal, and no matter how much you mask it people still relate it to you.

Is that so with you, is your poetry autobiographical?

It's always autobiographical to begin with. My poem, "I Am a Door"—somewhere, it is also about myself. But this self and others blend after a point because, after all, the origin is the same.

Are you saying that this could be every woman's experience, or that you manage to universalise your own experience . . .?

Sometimes . . . this is how I offer solace to myself. This is not only my suffering—I have seen so much, all the people I have read about—our suffering is a shared suffering, we all meet at some point and there's a kind of solace in this, that there are people who are much worse off . . . and after all my pain is not really visible, no one can see it . . .

About how old would you have been when you wrote "I Am a Door"?

Twenty-five or so.

How did you happen to write it?

There were so many themes in it, so many points . . . (*long pause*)

Do you still write about them?

I do, but there are some problems that stay with you forever, as long as you live. One adjusts. One is not as despairing as before. You see other dimensions of the problem. In the beginning you're taken aback, you think, my god what has happened, the world is topsy-turvy. But you change. You invest in your children, you think, after all, everyone has some sorrow or the other . . .

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But still, the pain is evident. Your poem "Fill in the Blanks" is a profoundly . . .

That was when my children were born. Gradually, one's feeling of emptiness rises from the depths and soars into the heavens. I wanted to console myself that everyone feels this emptiness, everyone has to fill in the blanks.

But do you feel this is something that is common among women, this business of sublimation in their writing?

I think so. I mean, women cope with so much, take on so much, if they didn't sublimate they would end up in an asylum. And then everyone has their own level of sensitivity and endurance, some more, some less. And there are different kinds of suffering, degrees of misunderstanding . . .

But when women write, do you think they resort to sublimation as a device?

Yes, it's a defence mechanism, a form of censorship. It's oblique, it can be sublimated, people can read it any way they like and if they don't want to, they needn't. Anyway, who takes women's writing seriously, who takes any notice of it? Just spreading ink on paper—this is the common response unless you are some celebrity, then they might . . .

But if no one takes any notice of you, why bother to conceal?

(*Long pause*). No external need, but maybe one conceals from oneself? It must be that otherwise, really, who has the time to read what you write?

But still, there's always the fear that someone may read what you write. After all, you tore up your diary—

Yes, that is there.

What interests me about this question is that, of course, people write for different reasons—one writes to express oneself, to escape, to communicate, to give voice to something, whatever the motivation.

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The question is: is the same extent of concealment evident in men's writing?

No, it can't be, because for them there is an element of heroism, of making known . . .

In other words it should be made public, whereas with women it should remain private. Do you think this?

It's not the ideal situation but it is what actually happens. You know, the swagger—look how I dealt with it, this is how I countered it. Even if the patriarch is not aggressive, generally the response is, I'll show you, I'll see how you get the better of me. This is how I establish myself. I mean, men are really war-like!

Do you think this makes a difference to the subject matter of writing or only to the style?

Subject matter is always related to suffering, for everyone. The gap between the ideal and the actual—this is what makes you write, isn't it. If everything were fine, then why write? So creative tension has to be there and men experience it, too.

People say that women's writing is often bound by domesticity, that it occupies the domestic space and men's writing occupies the social space . . .

Women internalize more, look at Jane Austen. . . Women have a knack of making much of small things, and 'trivialising' big ones. Sometimes it's just a question of her mood at the time, how much intensity she responds with. . . There's a poem of mine, "Ek Aurat ka Pehla Rajkiya Pravas"—I wrote it on my first trip to Bangladesh and my first thought was for the home—is everything alright? My children? So in the poem, this woman makes three calls home as soon as she arrives at the hotel. Should I read that bit to you?

Please.

Wherever she goes, even if it's into outer space, she worries about her home. Worries about having to prove that everything is okay, that I still belong to that space.

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She entered her hotel room
Shook hands warmly
With her alone-ness
Pitch-dark the room was
Within her, too, pitch-dark
Like a well
The walls closed in around her
But no light switch
A wide open door
A faint light from the balcony
A waiter passing by
Came to her rescue
Chuckled as he offered the clue
"For light, Madam, shut the door."
She shut the door firmly
And a thousand lights burned in the light bulbs
Like the thousand-petalled lotus of the Bodhisattva
Strange, she thought,
Why should closing a door
Make for light?

She stretched out on the bed
But felt her own chattai beneath her
Digging into her spine.
Is every woman like the princess and the peapod?
So much to read
But she reached for the phone
Enquired about rates
Then, using up all her dollars
Made three separate calls.
The first to her children
"Hello, son
You dozed off as I packed."
"Can't stop thinking of you."
"My most precious!"
The last two she said
Separately

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To her anxious mother
And that sulking husband of hers.

Now the cross-examination
God is her judge
How could she say
To three separate people
You are the most precious?
A complete deception.
Most precious is most precious
But the good lord set aside his pen and said,
"Woman that you are
You meant what you said.
For a woman all her dear ones
Are her dearest."

This is universal, I don't know why. We always have to prove we are sincere at every point, that we have given our best to everyone, and each one is the one dearest to us . . .

Is this part of your "good girl syndrome"?
I think so. Give the best to every relationship, whatever the strain. It's foolish, but it's there. One wants to give one's best to every relationship.

But this business of feeling compelled to give one's best—is this specific to women?
Yes, men don't bother. And if you remind them of their rough handling, say this is what you did, they don't want to talk about it. Most of them say—yes, maybe I did, but on the whole I love you, on the whole everything is okay. This on-the-whole business just means that small things don't matter. You are well-fed, you have shelter, what else could be troubling you? This is the question. You've been granted a space to work, what else do you need? The question of emotional gratification arises in physical relationships, too. How considerate you are, how much you're willing to take—or leave. So much delicate handling. Handle with care, like glass. I think we all have a 'glass-house' within

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us, and if it shatters inside—well, everything might seem okay externally, but there will be cracks.

Basically, you don't want your identity, your self-esteem to be crushed, because something in you dies with that. Freezes. Finishes. And you see so many women who just withdraw. They start playing with their gods—Hanumanji, Kali mata, and—I think these idols on the kitchen shelf become their playthings. Like toys. If they're annoyed with people in the family, well, they will just go and talk to God. I've even seen a woman slapping God and fighting with him, they do that often, saying—what is this you've done?

You were talking earlier about women's reluctance to talk about their suffering, especially when compared to people who are worse off than them . . .

You know, if you are socially insecure—on the streets, that is—then perhaps you have the right to talk about it and make it a public issue. But the small sufferings of life, as they are called, should be kept aside, kept to oneself. I mean as Rahim says—

रहिमन निज मन की व्यथा, मन ही राखो कोय
सुन अठ लै हें लोग सब, बांट न लई है कोय

Guard suffering like private property
But this property no one shares
So keep it close within
Exposed, they'll only laugh at it.

So we have been coached, tutored, to think that if we talk publicly about a personal sorrow we will be accused of complaining, of wallowing in self-pity.

In this context you said that people often say, well, after all you have everything. You have the space to write, the freedom to write, so what are you complaining about. Do you actually have the space to write?

Carving out a space—we keep postponing that, as we said just now. Let's finish this and this and this and *then* we will sit down with ourselves. Later on—and then this 'later on' hardly ever arrives. When it

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finally arrives in the dead of night or early in the morning—then you feel so crowded, you think you need more respite, you want to be more composed and maybe you want to relax for some time—when you are sitting by yourself surrounded with memories and all those bitter and sweet associations, you don't want to write, sometimes you just want to observe. And then, you see, you feel that time is running out, it's rushing by. I mean you organise yourself because you want the space, some 15 or 20 minutes, sometimes you get two hours—but sometimes you are so tired at the end of the day that you don't have the stamina to write. Still, when the pressure is immense, then you do settle down and write. But you know, it is a very tough task to carve out space, ample space . . .

So when do you write?
Early in the morning.

And where?
In my children's room when they leave for school. I have to get up early. I mean—instead of getting up at five I get up at four and I pack their tiffins and I give myself an hour or so. I wake them up around six, so that way I get a space of two hours. But sometimes I am tired and I also doze off when I come out of the kitchen.

So this fantasy of being able to write when the urge takes you—that seldom happens?
That seldom happens. When you are travelling in a bus, for instance, or in any public transport, I think that's the ideal time, when you're all by yourself. The crowd grants me some solitude, surrounded by strangers, all kinds of people. Sometimes I get raw material, too, I observe their interactions. But sometimes when I don't observe them I observe myself, and that is the time when I want to write, but then I can't—

It's possible with poetry, there is an image that haunts you and you know, if you remember that, if you can recall it, then even if the pressure has gone you can actually compose it, build upon it—sometimes it happens like that, but very rarely. On bus tickets also I have scribbled a few lines—

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You have said, speaking of a woman's situation, "Scissors to cut with, a needle and thread to sew with. If I were to write my subconscious the earth would fill with paper." Is this something you feel spontaneously? Is it a line from a poem, or is it something that defines your situation?

(*Softly.*) It defines my situation. It's at the back of my mind all the time. So much, so much—You know, I generally don't talk about things and that is why I write. Maybe if I had had a friend or somebody to talk to I may not have had the urge to write, but because I do not always have even a companion. . . I need to write about whatever happens, within and without.

Do you feel there is a great difference between what you write in your poetry and what you write in your prose?

Prose offers more scope for details . . . for realism. But psychological realism is taken care of in poems, too. I find poetry more fulfilling, I mean I am more comfortable with poetry. I don't know why—because images, you know, images are full of layers, so I feel that I can express myself better through an image than through details.

But you write both, so obviously you feel that one is more suitable for some things and the other for other things . . .

I don't know why I write in prose. When I want to write about myself I write poems.

So would you say poetry is first person, and prose is third person for you?

I don't know, because in my prose also my personal is political. I never say that I am a remote distant self when I write poetry, the "I" in me is always predominant. Of course it is a multiple "I" in prose as well, I mean it is all-inclusive, my "I" is multi-layered. My "I" is not only me speaking. And the element of personal is always there in prose, too, it is my version of whatever I have seen. Even if it is not *my* experience it's the way I have reacted to somebody else's bit of experience. I am not a photographer, I am a lens myself, everything gets refracted through me so I can't possibly deny that element of subjectivity.

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What about language—have you thought of using another language for a different kind of writing? I don't mean symbolic language but, literally, another medium—in terms of Hindi, English, Bhojpuri . . .

No, all these dialects—Bihar is very rich in dialects. There are five dialects and I think—because I have stayed with women and have interacted with rural women also—I am familiar with Magahi, Bajjika, Bhojpuri and Maithili.

But you don't write in them?

No, but you know, sometimes when I sit down to write, at the back of my mind there are certain forceful expressions in different dialects that rush into my writing. Even if it is standard khadi boli Hindi those words, some metaphors from folk poetry, for instance, the idiomatic vigour of a dialogue—sometimes I make use of them.

Do you use it more in your poetry or your prose?

In both, I suppose. When a character is speaking in a novel, for instance, then the idiomatic vigour of that dialect is used. Even in poetry, sometimes, people say they can detect it.

Because you say your poetry is much more personal, I wonder if your voice finds its expression in these different dialects . . .

Yes, it does. I don't know how but perhaps it's because I grew up with all kinds of rural and semi-urban women, so it's a matter of psyche, too. Their words have always fascinated me, some words, some expressions were more forceful even if they were in dialect. So I internalised them, they have become a part of my being. They are my "Daffodils", they inspire me.

Have you ever been stopped from writing?

Yes, sometimes yes, during the exams, and otherwise also—they say *that* comes first in our priority list. Child-bearing-rearing age, again there were many pressures on me. I mean there was no one else to say don't write because I was living on my own, and I always got up early in the morning so I could have written. But sometimes I was very tired and then, sometimes, if I was very low I would feel like writing

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but would think I was being selfish. Instead of giving my time to my family I was giving it to myself.

And do you have that kind of constraint or restraint in terms of what you write?

No-o. At home no one bothers to find out what kind of writing . . .

Your family—do they read what you write?

Not now, they don't.

No, I mean do they read it when it's published?

No.

Your poems?

Sometimes, if I am going to make a stage appearance and I want to check how people will react, I make people sit down and listen, though they're very bored! (*Laughs*) This is something that I do. Sometimes I even drag my children out and say, listen, how does it sound? It's very funny! Children react at a different level but you know, that is also—if I can't find anyone else, I ask my son and he gives his expert opinion. (*Laughs uproariously.*)

What about your mother?

She reads everything. She doesn't stay with me, but she has read every bit of my writing and she is my best critic, my mother. Yes, she is the only person who reads all that I write. And through my writing she tries to learn about my life and sufferings. She does not talk about it directly, but she understands . . .

Anamika, how would you see your evolution as a writer? When you observe yourself . . .

(*Pause*). My "I" is a fuller "I" now, as I grow. It was a very small range that I covered initially, a tiny little "I"; now it is fuller. It is multi-layered, and it is more accommodative. It accommodates many echoes, many voices. It is a multiple "I" now.

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Have you ever thought of stopping writing?
Sometimes, when I feel it is too much, because it tortures you when you are not able to write. Like a working mother's milk, you know, you feel full but there is no release. It's almost like that. Then you feel very bad.

But of course you didn't stop, you carried on.
Carried on, somehow, yes. It is always somehow . . .

I am going to ask you a very fantastic question—if you had one wish for your writing, what would it be?
One wish for my writing . . . (*long pause.*) I would travel a lot in different regions, with different people, and I would interview them. I want to know. And I want that kind of space. That is a dream I still have. I want to see all kinds of islands and mountains and I need, I want, to meet women, especially, everywhere I want to reach out to them. This is my dream. I've led a life of confinement, basically. I mean, people have reached out to me, somehow, in trains and buses, in the university—this is the kind of interaction I have been granted in my life, but I have not been given the space to travel around on my own and to reach out to people on my own.

Do you ever feel that you have censored yourself? Would it be in terms of subject matter? Of style?
Women don't want to hurt. If we hurt others I think it reflects more on us, we are hurt, too. On second thoughts it pains us more than it pains them. So because, ultimately, it is a spear pointed at both ends we think it is a bad idea to hurt. Though self-inflicted wounds also torture us if we don't give expression to whatever we feel, if we keep internalising and introverting then . . . you can end up being one of those women suffering from hormonal disorders, bleeding all the time. I think that is a kind of suffering, too. You meet a lady doctor and she says, oh my god, every third patient has irregular, dysfunctional uterine bleeding. What is that? I have seen women who have never spoken, never been articulate about what kind of sufferings they have,

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generally such poised and dignified women, and they have suffered this. That whole notion of being dignified, suffering in silence is strange. . . It is the stranglehold of respectability: this fear of being misunderstood sometimes makes one bleed to death. . . And being misunderstood has its own problems—I will be getting the kind of attention I don't want. I'll be branded, I'll be in trouble, there are practical problems . . .

When you say that you have censored yourself, what exactly do you mean by that?

Censor in the sense of oblique references, I have taken recourse to images—which means a lot to me—but because images are images, there are multiple layers and there are seven layers of ambiguity, so six layers would be clear to me and one layer would be clear to you. Six I have kept for myself. I have been dishonest in a way, but then it has . . .

Gagan Gill has said that when she was younger she was far freer in her writing, but as she grew older and became more well known, relatively speaking, she found her writing had become more circumspect—the word she used was "deceitful". Is that something you agree with?

(*Long pause.*) Yes, if people nurture you, you want to be a model, look grand, I suppose. . . I mean, in your young days you hardly feel that people are looking up to you—the sense of being public is less defined. So you feel freer, and you also feel: who would bother to read me, so let me express myself the way I would in a letter to my friend or in a diary—you don't know that you will have an audience or a reader, you're never sure. Initially, where's the fear? But later, one thinks—so many people will read me so I must be careful. . . Spontaneity vanishes. That element of recollecting in tranquility comes to the fore and we also give it greater value. Writing that has a flourish of a different kind, is more meaningful, more condensed . . .

Do you think male writers are similarly constrained by the 'public' aspect of their writing?

First of all they don't face practical problems; even if they choose a

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certain kind of image they won't get into trouble, so there's that. No one will try to take advantage of their being open about their sexuality. Second thing is that sense of triumph, that we are open and frank. But with women the battle is always half-fought, you don't have anything to boast about. I mean even if they're dead they're not sure whether they've won the battle or lost . . . they're always in a half-way house.

How do you reconcile the tension between your public face or public self, and your private face, in your writing?

(*Long pause.*) I don't like to appear emotional, especially in private, I like to be a very sensible, very quiet, very patient kind of a woman, very controlled, someone who would offer some kind of solace, whose very presence would offer some kind of solace to others, to the husband, to children and all that—but you know, internally I may not be as quiet or dignified. This is the kind of . . . gap. So like a little actress, you know, I want to—I mean, I think I'm always on the stage, always trying to perform a little role here and a little role there. Because in my mind I always think my presence should be soothing to people. So . . .

So whatever turbulence you might experience within yourself is concealed? Do you ever lose your temper?

I try not to lose it, and that creates a lot of pressure sometimes. I do shed tears, but not in front of people because I am afraid of being ridiculed. I don't want that to happen. I gain a lot from other people, I have an insight into their problems and that is very satisfying to me. I feel like I am a part of their inner being. . . I *want* to know about people, I *really* want to know, and if I give the impression of being weak myself, people will hardly open up. The only outlet I have is listening to other people.

You said that you feel like a little actress playing a role. Do you think marriage, domesticity, are like a performance for women?

That's right. You have to perform, you have to excel in every aspect. I mean, as a cook you have to excel, as housekeeper . . . and there are so many shades of relationship, so many expectations, especially in a

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joint family set-up, and you have to live up to everybody's expectations. You have to pass so many tests every day, and at the end of the day you feel like a little boy reading his own report card—boy or girl—okay, this is what I have achieved today . . .

This pressure to pass with good marks—is it something that women are subjected to much more than men?

Oh yes, there is no doubt about it. No doubt at all. Men . . . they think that by virtue of being men they have proved everything, they don't have to prove anything else. Other than excelling in a career. *Ghee ka laddu, terha bhi bhala*—this is what we say in Bihar and Rajasthan. Let's begin with what's skin deep, this thing with beauty. If you don't grow tall, or if you're overweight, if you do not have a blemish-free skin—right from the beginning you have to prove yourself, but with boys, all they have to do is use their brains, *Ghee ka laddu to hai . . .*

So when people say there is no such thing as women's writing or men's writing, no such thing as gendered experience, that you are a writer first, man or woman—how do you respond to that?

That again is a kind of censorship, you know, I think people don't want to accept that it is there. It's as if calling them women writers is like abusing them, that women's writing is a lesser kind of writing, that to have a woman's perspective is somehow short of reaching the top.

I feel like getting to know the woman who says she is not a woman, is just a human being, and I want to find out what actually makes her say so. One can never rise above constructs like caste, class, gender—these I suppose are the basic things. This is writ large, this is what I feel. A woman's perspective is a woman's perspective, there is no doubt about it. It's more emotive, more intuitive, but it doesn't mean that she can't rationalise. That comes later. . .

Interviewed by Ritu Menon

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Sarup Dhruv

"I'VE ALWAYS been a creature of the environment, but today I feel confident that I can create an environment as well." These are the words with which Sarup Dhruv (b. 1947) concludes this interview, done in 2001. Has that confidence withstood the Gujarat genocide of February 2002? Was she forced to stand by helplessly as innocent people were brutally massacred and those people with whom, and for whom, she had worked—Dalits, adivasis, the women who came together in *Kalam*—were co-opted by the forces of communalism? Sarup and her comrades have not given up. As soon as they could, they went to the aid of the victims bringing relief supplies, comforting, recording, registering cases. Their tireless efforts did something to restore the victims' faith in our society and our people.

As one instance of the kind of work they did—and are doing—one may cite the street play that Hiren Gandhi and Sarup staged for the organisation, Aman Samudaya. The very title *Dilma Chhe Ek Ash* affirms that the heart remains hopeful. This play was staged in relief camps where audiences responded with lamentation, anger and terror as they relived their experiences but they always appreciated the fact that somebody cared and understood .

The title of Sarup Dhruv's latest collection of poems (forthcoming) is *Hastakshep* (Intervention), which again is a declara-

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tion that a writer *can* intervene. One section, *Before and After the Genocide* indicates that many of poems were written before the carnage and others, later. In the poem "Why Should I Live Any Longer?" Sarup herself becomes the tortured Suraiyas, Salmas, Fatimas, Shahnazes and Aminas of this nation. Dying, she yet finds a reason for living—in order to bear witness and to struggle ceaselessly so that such events never happen again.

Sarup's social concerns are paramount; the political is, for her, the most personal. The medieval poet Narsinh Mehta begins his famous song with the line: "The true Vaishnav is one who knows the suffering of others." In saying this, Narsinh Mehta was ahead of his times; Sarup Dhruv goes further because she realises that this suffering does not operate at the individual level alone and cannot be alleviated till the systems that cause it are overthrown.

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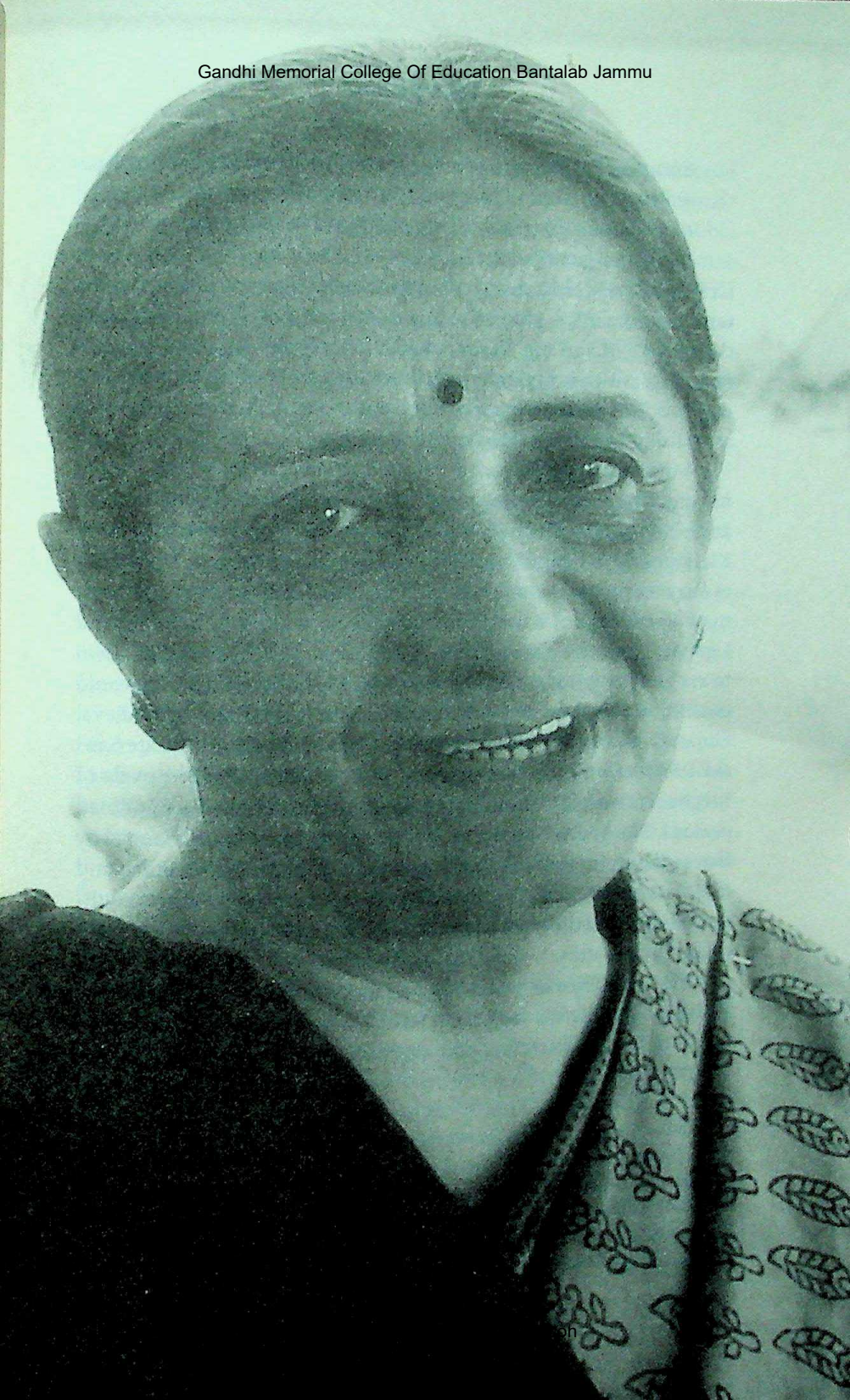

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Sarupbehn, in the past you've often written about your journey as a writer, your ideals in life and literature; I'd like to discuss that a bit more. Shall we begin with your childhood and the shaping influences of home and family?

Certainly. I was the eldest child in my family. My next sibling—a sister—is four and a half years younger than me. For all that time I was the only child and was showered with love. In my father's family, in fact, after his own birth there had been no child till I was born so I was much loved by everyone! But I was a wilful child. If I asked for something I had to get it . . . and I did get it.

Mine was a very educated, cultured family. I was very attached to my grandmother who was a Prarthana Samaji,* had finished school and could read English. My grandfather had a job in the Salt Estate at Kharaghoda in Saurashtra. Although our family was not from Saurashtra, my grandparents had lived there so long that they had intimate knowledge of its customs and social practices, folk stories and legends. They were almost Kathiawadis themselves. When we sat down to eat and my grandmother served us piping hot chapattis she would chant the *Nalakhyan* or the *Dhruvakhyan* of Premanand (a medieval Gujarati poet known for his narrative poems). She'd also recite Sanskrit *Subhashitas*. She'd talk about the characters in the novels of Meghani (a novelist and collector of folk literature from the Gandhian period). She knew songs from *Saraswatichandra* (a massive novel by Govardhanram Tripathi dealing with political, social, gender and moral issues). I would listen avidly as she spoke. Metres, songs, mythology—this was the wealth I garnered; it didn't matter that we weren't financially wealthy.

The ambience at my mother's family home was different. My maternal grandfather held the post of Diwan and so here there were works of English literature and modern American periodicals. He'd

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*A Hindu religious reformist movement which had its genesis in Bengal's Brahmo Samaj but took deep root in Maharashtra. It was founded in 1867 and its followers were from the religious tradition of Maharashtra's saints like Namdev, Tukaram and Ramdas. Like the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj also propagated the rational worship of one god, and social reforms—among them widow remarriage and the improvement of the status of women.

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read, and with him I'd also make an effort to read. The household had several modern gadgets. It was a Nagari family but not at all ritualistic. Until my grandfather died in 1973 weekends were spent at his house. Besides literature there were books on painting and sculpture from all over the world and my grandfather would show them all to me—I was quite familiar with terms like 'Byzantine art'. So these were the formative years of my childhood.

What I absorbed in the homes of my grandparents was definitely a great influence on me. The two homes were close by so we were constantly together. Everything was jointly planned.

Did you experience any restrictions or pressures as a girl?

I had complete freedom. I was allowed to live as I pleased, do what I pleased. My grandmother's sister would keep saying it was time I was taught to cook and do other household tasks, but my grandmother believed that if one was good at one thing one would easily pick up other skills later. I was good at studies so I'd learn cooking when the need arose! (I haven't yet experimented in that area!)

Much later, when I was 25 and had begun to lead a Bohemian life, my father did try to check me. Perhaps he was worried for me. Later on in life I realised that he was right but at that time I had this heady sense of freedom and there were ceaseless confrontations. But in my childhood I was never told to do something or not do something because I was a girl. My upbringing was like that of a boy and from the start I was in co-educational institutions. I took part in cultural activities, I represented my school in competitions, and I worked enthusiastically for the school magazine.

Since I did well in my high school exam my father subscribed to a scheme run by Hind Pocket Books in Delhi at that time. This entitled me to six books worth five rupees each. In addition, he gave me some more money each year to buy books. Through this scheme I collected many Hindi classics and other World Classics in Hindi translation. All these were a fertilizing influence.

When I joined Xavier's College I experienced class difference for the first time. We were very middle class. I had little pocket money compared to many others—scarcely any, actually. At one stage we didn't have ready cash to spend—we were five children at home and

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I was the eldest. I understood my responsibility and did not mind that I didn't have more money to spend—I had my books!

In college wealthy children would arrive in their chauffeur-driven cars, sometimes on their own bikes or scooters. I did occasionally feel that I lacked all this but then I had Tolstoy, Gorky, Premchand in Hindi or Gujarati translation, even in English which I could read fairly fluently. I had had some exposure to socialist ideology and, even at this stage, I'd realised that happiness was not necessarily linked to wealth. I had given some thought to the means by which wealth was produced and obtained.

Did you have socialist friends in college?

No, my friends were from this wealthy circle. At that time I used to learn dancing at Mrinalini Sarabhai's Darpan dance school and there, too, my companions were the daughters of rich businessmen and industrialists. So I had a bit of an inferiority complex because I lacked what they possessed, but at the same time I felt anger at social injustice. My present ideology has its origins in that period. At that time I had a very cosmopolitan circle of friends—both men and women. My closest friend was a Jain. I'd often visit her home, accompany her to Jain temples, take part in their festivals . . .

Nowadays I don't take part in festivals, but for many years I've been teaching the Jesuit fathers about Gujarati culture, along with the language. We've organised cultural tours in this connection for the last 13 years or so and all this has played as large a part in my work as my extensive reading.

One quality that is immediately noticeable in your collection of poems, Mara Hathni Vat (In My Own Hands) *is the way you draw on this whole store of experience. The use of colloquial language and the very natural and spontaneous references to customs, beliefs, legends will not, I think, be found to the same extent in the poems of your contemporaries.*

This is, of course, part of my family heritage, but besides that I also did my PhD on folk literature, so I had done a great deal of reading in that area during the period that I was writing the poems you refer to. Perhaps my temperament is such that I am influenced by my sur-

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roundings, and what I draw from there finds expression in fresh ways. This has always been the case with me. The cadences and idioms very naturally enter my poems. Among my contemporaries there are two poets who employ this kind of language—Sitanshu and Labhshankar—and that is because their background is, to some extent, similar to mine. Sitanshu is a Nagar Brahmin and he comes from more or less the same background as my paternal grandfather. Labhshankar is from Kathiawad where my maternal grandfather lived for years; because of this common background the language on which we draw is similar. Critics claim that I imitate these poets but that's totally incorrect—I may be influenced by them in other respects but definitely not in language.

You've written that though the Maha Gujarat Andolan (the movement for a separate Gujarat state) was taking place in your childhood and, later, the Navnirman Andolan (student's movement) during your youth, you remained uninvolved and unaffected. Is that so?

During the Maha Gujarat Andolan in 1956 I was quite young. I grew up in the midst of riots—there was firing and tear-gas on our street. Certainly that upset and frightened me, and I came to believe that politics must mean violence. When the Navnirman Andolan started in 1974 I was doing my PhD and had become a bookworm even though I interacted with many friends. When I read a writer like Gorky, of course I was exposed to politics, but I somehow thought that this was a subject for literature. It must have been my own immaturity that I compartmentalised things in this way. Besides, I knew how political movements had been conducted in the Gandhian era, and what was going on around me was so different from the ideals cherished in those days that I didn't want to get involved. And, of course, the influence of the immediate circle in which I moved—the literary circles—was very powerful. I sometimes worry about it . . . why do I just flow in one direction or another like water?

When did you actually begin writing?

In a sense I was writing even while at school for the school magazine, but I wasn't writing poetry then. The situation from which my first poem sprang was rather out-of-the-ordinary. There were horrific

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communal riots in Ahmedabad in 1969. Like the riots in 1992, these too were very ugly. There was a Muslim family living behind our house and they received frequent threats. One day a mob arrived and said that if they didn't leave, their house would be burnt and they would be butchered. In fact, some of their belongings were dragged out and burnt. My father, a very secular man, was very disturbed. Since we didn't have a phone he went to the building opposite us and told the police that when a citizen's house was being torched they should do something about it. It was on this subject that I wrote my first poem, addressed to the mob that had come to burn down Ajmeribai's home. After that I continued to write poems—about my own loneliness and things like that—but all that remained confined to notebooks.

I began writing seriously only around 1971 when I got a UGC scholarship to do my PhD. In the library of the Gujarat Vidyapeeth where I worked, several modernist poets would get together daily. I began to feel that I had creative ability, and I always did have the urge to demonstrate that I was different from others, that I had it in me to achieve something. Besides, expression was a window through which I could escape from myself. Even now, when I'm in an impetuous mood (and my moods are always changing) I feel I'm different from others.

So I began to make a conscious effort to write and get to know myself. Free verse, not bound by any strict metrical form, came easily to me. I read my poems to my senior friends and they liked them. I wrote ghazals, too. My knowledge of metrical forms was sound—after all, Gujarati literature had been my subject of study. I began to feel that this was going to be my vocation. Literature is my home—that's where I get my sense of identity from.

Who were the poets in this group? Would you consider them modernist or post-modernist?

The major poet in this group was Chinu Modi. I'd say that his poems were free-verse, modernist, his ghazals post-modernist. At that time I believed that modernism signified the urge to break free from social structures. I, too, felt that urge. I was attached to my home but in many respects I wanted more freedom . . .

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Were Sitanshu and Labhshankar part of this group?
Sitanshu lived in Mumbai but we'd meet when he came to Ahmedabad. He's distantly related to me. Labhshankar belonged to Ahmedabad. His group was earlier the Re-Math (later the Akanth) Group. We set up a group called the Hotel Poets Group, under the guidance of Chinu Modi. Since we used to meet regularly in any case, we thought why not establish a group. Delpat Padhia, Diva Panday, Dwarikanath Sanchihar, Himangini Shah, Hiren Gandhi, Viju Ganatra were some of the other members.

Did any poets of the older generation influence your writing?
Chinu Modi was generally a guide, philosopher and friend. His ghazals, and to some extent his free verse, did influence my style but there was greater identification with Sitanshu and Labhshankar because of our shared backgrounds. Ideologically, too, we shared something. Sitanshu searches for new meanings in tradition from which a new human being emerges, Labhshankar looks at humanity as it is and searches within it for the new human being. I, too, am in search of the new human being. I have had certain links with them, but today the context and the time-frame in which I work is different, and I try to understand the human being with the help of a new framework.

I used to like Umashankar (Joshi) but I found him too didactic sometimes—particularly what he wrote in the Gandhian period. For us, suggestion was more important—we had been influenced by the ideas of Suresh Joshi. But personally, he was very good to me. He regarded me as a promising writer and encouraged me in every way. Although he had such a great reputation himself he would reach out to a person like me. He was truly gracious.

Was it because of the literary environment that you wrote the kind of poetry you did?
Yes, but I was also modern in my own outlook and temperament.

In the preface to your anthology, Salagti Havao (Blazing Winds), *you have said that Gujarati poetry had always been socially oriented for decades, but during this decade it became 'timeless'. Was that*

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a reference to the decade in which you were writing modernist poetry?

Yes. And I must accept my own responsibility for contributing to this trend. . .

There were other trends, too, in this period—geet (songs) and ghazals. Why were you not drawn to those?

The songs that were being written then were very effeminate. As I said before, I had not been brought up as a woman and my emotions and their expression are not what is characterised as typically feminine. I just can't say what I want to say in a song of that type. Even one of my favourite poets, Manilal Desai, wrote this kind of mawkish stuff. Geet just put me off, and ghazals do become a play with words. Rather than expressing the feeling faithfully, one churns out words to fit in with the *radief-kafeya* pattern of the ghazal, and the feeling is just fitted into that frame.

There was a time when I wrote two ghazals a day but it soon began to seem extravagant. I wanted to give up that facile play of words. Some of those ghazals were published in magazines but I didn't include them in my first collection. I enjoy listening to ghazals, though, particularly Urdu ghazals. Later, in new contexts, I altered and revived the ghazal form and some of these political ghazals are included in *Salagti Havao*. And now, of course, I write a number of songs—not literary songs but feminist songs, songs of the people's movement. We use traditional tunes—Mahendrabhai Oza who works with us sets them to music, along with me.

Do you sing as well?

No, my voice is not suited to that, but I love to listen to music—ranging from classical music to filmi ghazals, Urdu ghazals of Begum Akhtar—I listen to all this for relaxation.

Did you ever try to write fiction?

My only venture in this was in 1964 when my story *Shalmali* won the third prize in a competition. It was published in *Stree* magazine under the pen name 'Nirmohi'. It showed traces of the influence of Satyajit Ray!

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Do you prefer poetry because it becomes a mode of self-scrutiny or because you enjoy playing around with words?

Both, but self-expression is a necessity for me. If I wrote a story I would need to employ some device to transform my own personal experience—the use of the first person, for instance—and that doesn't work out satisfactorily. I can't sustain it. In poetry I can immediately say what I want to say. However, now I want to try a new genre, not quite fiction and not quite recollection. I want to talk about the many different people I have met during the last two decades. I want to break out of the uniform pattern I have got into. Poetry wouldn't be the right medium for this kind of experience and, besides, I would avoid the danger of self-centredness.

Going back a bit and looking at your earlier poems, were you writing as a woman? Would you say that they expressed a woman's sensibility? Did you call yourself a feminist then?

No, Shirinbehn, I did not. And when I read poets like Pannabehn (Naik), I'd feel: "What's all this? How can a woman's sensibility be considered different from a man's?" I believed that a creative writer has no gender. I was immature. I felt that her kind of writing was too personal, that it should form part of a diary and not masquerade as poetry. Jayabehn (Mehta) was more neutral and so I liked her poetry. I just wasn't interested in the lives of women or their problems. I felt Panna was too sensational, the laments over her childlessness too insistent. Now I realise that she has been able to express the grief of so many women, but at that time I found her writing too feminine, too womanish. I decried this womanish tendency to break down all the time . . .

What about the women novelists of that time?

Dhiruben (Patel) and Varshabehn (Adalja) were writing at that time, and I would read them, but I didn't take them very seriously. They confined themselves to domestic settings and man-woman relationships. Now I see them differently. At that time what appealed to me was the brazen expression of sexual desire—Mukund Parikh, Shrikant Shah, some novels by Chinu Modi and Labhshankar Thakar, translations of Camus and Sartre. I used to read these without adequately

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understanding them, taking them to be stories of individual rebellion, an expression of an individual predicament. I didn't take into account the social forces against which this individual rebellion was directed. I hadn't read about the theory of existentialism but it was that element in the novels that appealed to me. I must admit that my understanding was limited. Today, I interpret it quite differently, in keeping with my new political outlook. At that time what appealed to me were the language and the sense of the individual's isolation. Now, of course, I call myself a feminist. As a leftist member of a people's movement if I am fighting the battles of the working class, half of them are women, aren't they?

Were you affected by any kind of censorship—even self-censorship—in this first stage of your career?

No, because though I was writing about intimate personal relationships my mode of expression was so indirect—using symbols—that people accepted and admired what I wrote without knowing the context. Actually, I was involved in a rather destructive relationship and *Mara Hathni Vat* dealt with that—but I didn't need to deliberately conceal this because my natural style of writing was so indirect.

How old were you when you wrote these poems?

About 23–24. I started in 1974 and by the time I was 30 it was all over. If I'd got married I'd probably have been the mother of two children, leading the life of a housewife!

You've written somewhere that during the second phase of your life you were criticised because you used to move around freely with your socialist friends. Were you not criticised earlier?

It was during the earlier phase that I was criticised because that's when I used to behave uninhibitedly. During college I'd given up all restrictions with regard to food and drink—actually an uncle of mine was in the army and at his house there were no restrictions. My parents knew about this and they worried, lest the modern upbringing I had received had undesirable consequences. My father wasn't concerned about the food and drink but I also used to stay out late with my circle of friends at that time. They were all men—married—and

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I was the only woman. Our Ahmedabad culture was like that. We'd eat out together, wander around, have tea, return home at two in the morning—that's why I was criticised. It didn't bother me at all then, and it still doesn't, but it did come in the way of my becoming established!

But that stage of my life came to an end, relations with these friends were cut off. In Gandhian circles the generation before mine, as well as the generation that followed, were all puritanical and in their minds I was linked with that other circle. The women writers were wary of having very much to do with me. Nowhere could I experience the sense of belonging that I desired. I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't have any other personal or family life to compensate—I wasn't present on family occasions—there was a complete void. But I still don't feel that this bohemian life was wrong.

Did any of this come in the way of your publishing your poems?
Not with so many senior poets as my friends. And besides, I probably wrote quite well so my poems were published in magazines like *Kavita* and *Navneet-Samarpan*. When Niranjan Bhagat started *Sahitya* he asked me for a poem for the first issue. When our own Hotel Poets Group undertook the publication of members' poems, my collection too was published. During this phase I received frequent invitations to read my poems at Kavi Sammelans, and people applauded them. I was acclaimed as a promising poet. In fact when *Mara Hathni Vat* was finally published the invitation to publish came from the publishers.

When your outlook and your style of writing changed subsequently, did you encounter more difficulties with regard to publication?
Yes, but by then I wasn't worried about whether those writings would be regarded as 'literature', because I knew that the women and men for whom I wrote those songs would be singing them—my creative urge was satisfied.

Did anyone write any articles or substantial reviews of your poems?
Just scattered references. By the time the collection was published in book form I had left that modernist group. Chandrakant Sheth and

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some others did write but I didn't like the terms in which they spoke of my poems—'obscure poetry', 'emotions natural to a woman', etc. But I certainly received all the attention a newcomer could expect.

What was the 'Hu Group'? Was it distinct from the Hotel Poets Group?

Yes, quite distinct. It consisted of students of the H.P. College who were connected with the Navnirman Movement. In some respects their outlook was modernist and existentialist, but in others more post-modernist. They were politically aware, pro-people to some extent, but at that time I didn't find them too congenial.

What kind of social reconstruction did the Navnirman Movement aim at? Was it socialist or was it largely destructive?

The leaders they had in the beginning did have links with Jayaprakash Narayan and they could have drawn the youth in the right direction. If the younger generation in Gujarat had really understood JP's concepts, the movement itself and Gujarati literature would have moved in the right direction. But that didn't happen. They turned to destruction and to corrupt electoral politics. Some—including some poets—joined the Congress party. One or two poets joined the H.P. Group, others stopped writing, still others went into oblivion—it was a tragic case, the Hu Group.

The dissatisfaction you came to feel with your own poetry—was it because of your later socialist convictions or for personal reasons?

Eighty per cent of it was because of personal reasons. In 1978 I split with these poets. I was beginning to feel that their defiance of society was hollow. They were as intolerant as other men. My 'being' and my 'becoming' in their presence was something they didn't really understand. What I'm going to say now is a personal matter but I think the time has come when I can, and should, talk about it freely. At that period in my life I didn't believe that any restrictions should be observed in relationships, particularly man-woman relationships. I didn't believe in marriage or long-term commitment. If one felt drawn to a man, even a married man, I saw nothing wrong in establishing a rela-

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tionship with him—companionship or even more. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were my ideals, their kind of relationship.

I thought these senior poets, whom I respected, appreciated all this. Perhaps there were misunderstandings on both sides. It could also be that I hadn't fully understood my own desires, but finally things didn't work out. Perhaps the person to whom I was so attached lacked something in himself and so didn't believe in permanence, whereas I thought that this kind of relationship should last, while permitting freedom of action on both sides. Our definitions of freedom clashed. The kind of freedom I claimed was not just for sexual indulgence. Suppose I wanted to spend some time with a friend or go by myself to see a film, why shouldn't I do so? It didn't hurt the other person in any way. I was prepared to allow him the same freedom. I must also admit that I had become like an emotional slave—I just wouldn't give up the relationship. It meant so much to me that I overlooked various flaws in that person's personality.

Friends in our group who belonged to a younger generation began to drop hints, but since I had a fiery temper they did not say too much. Still, I began to feel that although they were younger than me they were more familiar with the male nature than with mine. So I decided to break off that relationship. The kinds of allegations they made against me at the time made it a really nightmarish experience. That individual played a very important role not only in my personal life but in my life as a writer, too. I hadn't realised that a split at one level would also entail a split at the other. His supporters took some decisions which I can only call childish; they resolved to cut off all relations with me. He was an established poet; I was nothing in comparison and people even believed—and he himself maintained—that I existed only because he did! I was in his shadow. As a rule people think that a woman can't stand on her own and besides, it's always the woman who is unfaithful. They didn't realise that I, too, had something in me and that I'd survive without them.

Couldn't they see that you were being exploited?

In people's eyes I had taken the initiative in forming the relationship, so who was exploiting whom was a moot question. I suppose it's only natural that they should react that way.

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Was it then that you came into contact with the Jesuits, or later?
I started teaching for the Isusangh, the Society of Jesus, in 1974 and I continue till today—so it was simultaneous with my involvement with the other group. Newman Hall is their seminary where, along with philosophy and theology, regional language and culture are also taught. I teach Gujarati language and culture. There was a lot of diversity within this group. In the beginning there were Spanish fathers and nuns and one or two Yugoslavians as well. Later, the foreigners stopped coming but we had range of Indian-language speakers so I thought I should prepare lessons on subjects connected with their experience and activities, which would make it easier to teach them the language. I took up topics like health, or the problems of Dalits. I also prepared dialogues or playlets which they could use in their own work. The first songs I ever wrote were for this purpose—to be used in social work. I, who had never written literary songs, wrote on subjects like the rehydration of a child who was suffering from diarrhoea!

Working with the Jesuits brought me two great benefits. I got involved in experiments in language teaching and became aware of different aspects of language. It was interesting to examine the reflection of gender, caste and class in language. I started reading on the sociology of language. The other great benefit was that I came into contact with different sections of society. I used to accompany them to Adivasi areas, Dalit localities, areas where poorer Muslims lived in hutments and slums—without that I wouldn't have known how to prepare the material that my students needed for their work.

Were you still involved with your earlier associates?
Yes, but the relationship was slackening off. My enthusiasm for the Jesuits even irked the person with whom I was in a relationship!

Was it these people who gave your life a change of direction? Led you towards praxis?
Yes—but, after all, they believed in the status quo. They were, for the most part, prompted by compassion, so when I turned to Marxism I felt there was something lacking in them.

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But now, with liberation theology, haven't they too turned to Marxist thought?

That was after 1990. Today, those of us who are leftists find that we have more in common with the Jesuits than with the Gandhians, we find it easier to work with them.

You have written about your experience in conducting Gujarati language classes organised for women by SEWA—the dilemma of your own delight in playing with language and the imperative need to teach the kind of language the women could employ. How did you solve this problem?

It solved itself with my immersing myself more in social service and severing my ties with that earlier circle. I began to realise that society had no use at all for that obscure, subjective 'everything's in my own hands' (*Mara Hathni Vat*) kind of poetry, but this dichotomy did keep me from writing anything for a good two-and-a-half to three years. There was also the fear that since those others no longer accepted me, how would anyone else, even though I had now discovered a new definition of language and literature, as well as a new direction.

At this stage I was offered the chance of writing for the Development and Educational Communication Unit of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). This project, too, necessitated gathering knowledge about society and social issues. Of my old associates some supported me, Hiren Gandhi in particular. He had stood by me when I split from the old group. Our outlook was similar in many respects, we think alike about man-woman relationships. I was like Trishanku, suspended between heaven and earth, but this group of friends, some ten years younger than me, remained by my side. I was doubtful about how far we could work together, but I had a close rapport with Hiren who was a man of the theatre.

So when ISRO invited me to prepare programmes for them, I asked if Hiren could also be involved. They accepted my request. Twice a week we'd visit Dalit localities, as well as areas where other socially backward groups lived, and learn about their lives. Hiren also fulfilled my need for a relationship with a man. My leftist friends would

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joke and say that the think-tank was Hiren, the mouthpiece, Sarupbehn—because he was more advanced in theory while I had the gift of expression. So we worked together on street plays—I learnt a lot from him about the stage—and at national meets we go as a team.

Some of my work has been translated into other languages like Telugu. Now I don't have the sense of insecurity I had in my earlier relationship. Since we have been so close for the last 20 years a certain amount of possessiveness may have come in—perhaps we harass each other sometimes, indeed, I'm sure we do! I've always been rather wilful; if I want something, I must have it. He's married but we are more mature now; whereas earlier the relationship itself was of paramount importance to me, now it's the cause. For us, the common cause cements our relationship.

Which thinkers have influenced you the most?

Our interest in theory arose from our attempt to analyse the calamities that affected Gujarat as well as the country as a whole. For three years in succession, in the early Eighties, Gujarat suffered a severe drought. At the time of the Bhopal gas tragedy we set up a forum in Ahmedabad along with some environmentalists, some academics and others. We engaged ourselves in studying the effects of capitalist and imperialist growth, and tried to place these ideas before the general public. The Gandhians had become part of the establishment; Gandhian thought no longer seemed relevant. Those who were more modern in approach were not pro-people. The CPI (M-L) took note of us and we started attending their study circle. We read and discussed Marxist economics, we considered contemporary issues in the light of theory. There was corruption in politics and emergencies like the fundamentalist upsurge. It was at this point that a prominent figure in the Gujarati literary world declared that minorities should go to their respective countries. We exposed him, so the communists realised that we were people who didn't just talk, we were able to contend with established public figures. We wanted our ideas to spread. It was at this time that Hiren wrote a play about Bhagat Singh which was censored—we were not permitted to stage it.

Although Bhagat Singh is revered, this play was not about how he was treated—it was about an episode involving Gandhiji. When

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Bhagat Singh was sent to the gallows a conference of the Indian National Congress was to take place in Karachi in March 1931. Subhas Chandra Bose and Nehru supported Bhagat Singh but Gandhiji believed in appeasing the British. Lord Irwin sent for Gandhiji and told him that the death sentence had been passed. The INC meeting was on—Gandhiji suggested that they shouldn't carry out the sentence during the conference, that it could be done either earlier or later. Irwin pointed out that if it was done earlier there would be an uproar at the Conference. Gandhiji remained silent. His silence was interpreted as acceptance and Bhagat Singh was hanged in secrecy on the 23rd night.

At the time the play was written, it was the practice that it had to be submitted to the Script Censorship Committee before it was performed. The Committee declared that this scene would have to be omitted. We refused to do so. We had done extensive research on it and had come across many references to the incident. Hiren showed the chairman of the committee documentary proof, too, but the Committee refused to budge. We went ahead and staged the play as it was and, apart from our leftist friends, we also received support from many lawyers, judges and others. It became an issue of freedom of expression. This caused the leftists to appreciate and accept us and we became increasingly associated with them. Hiren and I are not members of the CPI (M–L) but we have been branded and practically subjected to a social boycott. Our plays and poems have been labelled propagandist by people who haven't even seen them. This made it virtually impossible for us to find a publisher. 'Leftist', 'propagandist'—these are terms of abuse in Gujarat. Besides, we were connected with the Narmada Bachao Andolan so we were further labelled as traitors to Gujarat. But now all this has ceased to hurt . . .

What activities are you currently engaged in?

If I had to use a phrase to describe myself, I'd say that I am a cultural activist. From around 1984 I have been involved in producing issue-based plays and other literature for NGOs in Gujarat. The material is educative, pro-people, in its point of view. Whatever we earn from it is ploughed back into this work. But even working with NGOs can be frustrating. ISRO itself, which could be termed our cradle, censored

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one of our plays—*Rajparivartan*—for bureaucratic reasons. It was a play based on the Sanskrit classic *Mruchhakatika*, exposing corruption in political life.

So sometimes one feels frustrated working in Gujarat—what one says isn't heard, what one writes isn't published—but at the national level, we draw strength when we join with organisations like the Sanskritik Manch. At that level we are connected with a wide range of organisations for whom we provide material according to their needs —songs and plays for the most part. You could call it non-formal education. We work with Adivasi and Dalit organisations, prepare programmes for international women's day, for instance. Hiren and I have set up what may be called a supportive NGO, Darshan, along with four or five other associates. From our consultancy charges we are able to pay for publication and other costs. Not only do we ourselves prepare the material, we also train the group with which we work, encouraging them to produce their own. We thus empower them and encourage their creativity. This has given me a great sense of fulfillment and achievement.

Secularism has always been a major concern of leftists and, particularly since 1992, this has become an area in which we have done a lot of work. Besides, we take up causes as they arise. For instance, after the earthquake in Kutch in January 2001, the massive aid that poured in did not reach the worst affected—the Dalits and the Muslims. As it is, these communities are marginalised, unorganised and socially backward. Factors like caste and community figured largely in the provision of aid. Upper caste organisations, including NRIs, thought only of their own castes.

So, to come back to your question, there are Dalit writers in Gujarat, though not as many as in Maharashtra, but they are allowing themselves to be 'co-opted', they're merging with the mainstream. They cannot be considered leftist. Among women's organisations we do not share a common outlook with those whose sole aim is economic empowerment. SEWA, for instance, has no objection to globalisation. We have more in common with feminist organisations with a distinctly secular agenda, like Sanchetana. Sometimes, even if we have problems with senior members of an organsiation, we relate very well with grassroots workers.

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It is not so much at the personal level but at an ideological one that we experience a sense of isolation. Still, the conviction that we are on the right path keeps us going. Even if the communist system has broken down in many former communist countries, what is the alternative? The problem may have been with the actual operation of the system, the exaltation of certain individuals and the establishment of a dictatorship, but that doesn't negate a communist ideology. Who else rises above considerations of gender and caste and works for the eradication of poverty, the empowerment of those who will never be anything but poor under the present system? True, we are treated almost as untouchables, we feel suffocated, but we are convinced of the truth of our ideology. At the national level, if not in Gujarat, we have allies.

You've recently set up an organisation of women writers called Kalam, *haven't you? Can you talk a bit about that?*

I used to maintain that a creative writer has no gender, but I realised later how much one has to endure on account of being a woman. When I came into contact with Sonalbehn Shukla and started writing for women, I realised that the problems women faced were to some extent common to all, and to some extent specific to women. I turned to feminism. In literary meets women are accorded a minor role; they offer bouquets and garlands, they are placed on the stage because of their decorative saris. There may be a certain degree of chivalry, but it is patronising. The whole atmosphere is demeaning. The portrayal of women in literature is not truthful. When a woman writer such as Kundanika Kapadia or Ilabehn Mehta tries to present an accurate picture, she is run down. One may agree that the resolution in Kundanika Kapadia's *Sat Paglan Akashman* (Seven Steps to Heaven) is at an individual level and takes recourse to spirituality, but look at how many other issues that novel raises and discusses! The conviction grew that something must be done to accord status and recognition to explicitly feminist, as well as other, women writers.

In early 2000, Gujarat's major literary body, the Gujarat Sahitya Parishad, held a conference to evaluate Gujarati writing of the previous decade, as well as the entire century. Even a recognised writer like Dhiruben Patel was sidelined. The Ahmedabad women were

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infuriated. All of them knew that I have a fighting spirit and have been an activist, so they came to me and said that we should do something. I agreed with them. Just around that time an invitation came from Women's WORLD and Asmita in Hyderabad to a Gujarati women writers' workshop in Valsad in February 2000. That's when I felt that what had happened at the Ahmedabad conference had been a form of censorship. What else is it when women writers are sidelined, isolated, unable to find a publisher or to obtain serious critical attention?

I returned from the Valsad workshop full of all I had learnt and discovered there. I talked to other women writers like Ritabehn Bhatt, Suhasbehn Oza, the Dalit writer, Jamnabehn Shrimali, and told them that we must do something. About 20 of us met and decided to set up a group called Kalam, which would meet twice a month. Members of this group would share their writing. Some women who did not write but who wanted to attend these readings nevertheless, were enrolled in a separate category. We launched this group on International Women's Day, March 8, 2000. There were 50 of us present, including a few male writers. It has been over two years and we are quite firmly established. I won't say that all the writers think of themselves as belonging to the women's movement, but the writer's own perception of society is evident and an opportunity is offered for self-expression. This is evident in the publication we bring out, also called *Kalam*.

All of us find it worthwhile—so many women are writing regularly, reading their work to others. Most of the writers are from Ahmedabad but a couple of them come from Gandhinagar. We had one workshop which was very enjoyable. The theme was *Mari Sarjan Prakriya* (My Creative Process) and writers talked about when they began writing, their inspiration and other things. On March 8, to mark the first anniversary of Kalam, we had a multi-media programme where we organised an exhibition of paintings interspersed with readings. It was reviewed widely, and after this our members were invited to read their poems at a gathering of women poets organised by Doordarshan, as well as at a poetry-reading organised by UNDP.

We plan to widen our range and try to introduce a more specifically feminist approach, but personally, I wouldn't like to limit our-

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selves to a feminist outlook. I want us to be more all-embracing, concerned with the problems of society and its oppressed sections.

What is your concept of a 'committed' writer?

By 'committed' I don't mean committed to an ideology. Also, it's not that one should study theory just because one wants to write about the poor—one needs to study how, from one stage to another, efforts have been made to tackle their problems and make that, too, part of one's literary work. Besides, a committed writer can't remain a drawing-room writer—that would be a contradiction. Praxis, committed action, is an urgent necessity. Without that there is a kind of hollowness in one's writing.

You also believe, don't you, that a committed writer does not merely write about *the oppressed but also* for *them?*

Not just that—I believe a committed writer writes not just *for* them but *with* them. Perhaps because of a lack of writing time, nobody in Gujarati has been able to write about them in the way that geniuses like Gorky, Premchand or Tolstoy have done. Even that would be a great accomplishment. But in addition, a committed writer should be actively engaged in working alongside them, empowering them to become creative.

This is what I'm trying to achieve. If even on one or two occasions we have been able to get justice because of a play we wrote, that gives me great happiness. To me it's just not enough that a creative writer should derive satisfaction from his or her own success in self-expression, one should be able to help the oppressed find their voice. One shouldn't stop with a description of suffering—one should find ways of eliminating it.

I've always been a creature of the environment. But today I feel confident that I can *create* an environment as well.

Interviewed by Shirin Kudchedkar

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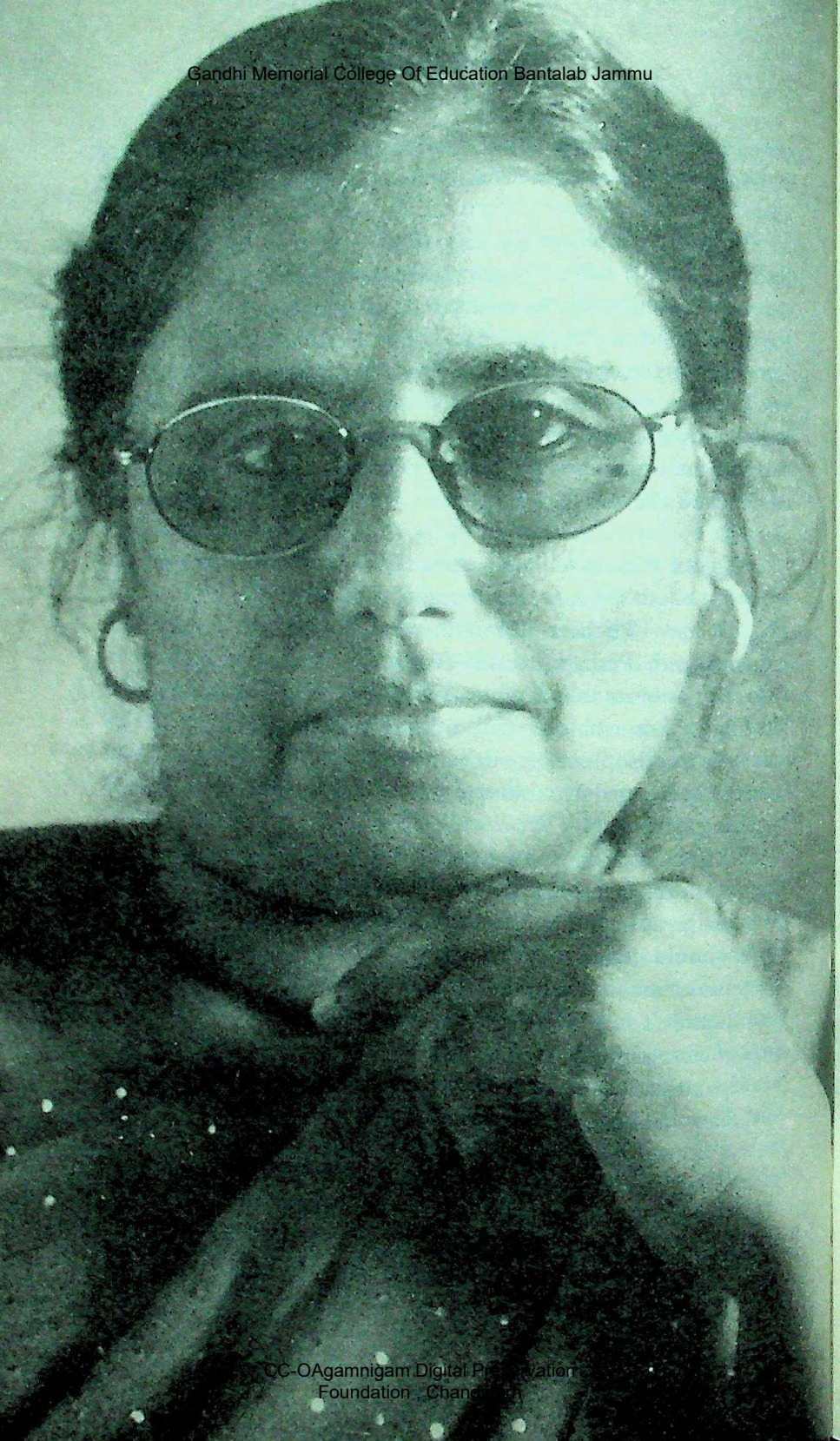

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Jameela Nishat

JAMEELA NISHAT (b. 1958) is a feminist poet of considerable significance on the Urdu literary scene in Andhra Pradesh. The daughter of a painter and artist belonging to the Muslim community, Jameela has had to straddle the twin tracks of modernity and tradition, progressive politics and issues of identity in the course of her life.

Born in Sultan Shahi, Jameela took a masters degree and a post-graduate diploma in theatre arts. Progressive poets and intellectuals like Maqdoom Mohinuddin, Aziz Qaisi and Kaifi Azmi were early influences on her, and Jameela began to write poetry at an early age.

Having grown up in an environment and culture shared by Hindus and Muslims, Jameela was forced to come to terms with the Muslim identity imposed on her after 1992. Working with Muslim women who are marginalized and isolated by rising communalism, she attempts to bridge the gap between the educated Muslim intellectual and the majority community. Firmly convinced that education is an instrument of social change, Jameela brings a national and regional political perspective to her local work.

Jameela writes in Hyderabadi Urdu and seeks to preserve Deccani culture. She has edited an anthology of Urdu poetry, *Inkeshaf*, which includes the work of 40 women poets. *Lava* and *Lamhe ki Ankh* are anthologies of Jameela's own poetry; she won the Maqdoom Award in 1972.

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Jameela, tell us a little about your background.

My father was a painter who struggled to paint; he was from a poor family and among Muslims painting is not allowed. He painted secretly on toilet walls, using waste paper picked up on the roadside. A nawab, recognizing his potential, sent him to the College of Fine Arts from where he graduated and then began to teach. Later he married my mother who came from a highly educated, cultured family. As children we grew up with this contrast between our grandparents' families.

How did your interest in art grow?

Right from my childhood I wanted to be a dancer. My father's family was of African descent, so you can say that dancing was in our blood. At weddings the men would all dance in the open while women danced behind the curtain. I loved to dance, and my father bought ghungrus for me—he would play the tabla while I danced. Those days were so joyous, but it all stopped when I was eight. Papa said girls shouldn't dance, Muslim girls don't dance. My dancing ended in school. My school-teachers liked me and wanted me to act in plays, but on the last day of the dress rehearsal my mother would say, "No! you can't participate—our girls don't do all this." I was silenced, slowly and systematically. I was only allowed to participate in *baith baazi*, debates and essay writing competitions. In the 1960s and '70s my Papa started Abri painting and I spent all my free time in his room. I saw images of men and women from Ajanta and Ellora, a huge painting of Buddha was lying in the room for almost six months . . . I absorbed every painting of my father's till it entered my blood. I badly wanted to paint. I was not allowed to, but I did it secretly and I used to say it was my brother's work—my younger brother was just six or seven years old and I was twelve or thirteen! I started spreading the images on the same wafers (after my Papa left) and transferring the image onto paper. My mother didn't really notice what I was doing so I could easily claim that my brother had done it. When people appreciated his artwork I was satisfied. First, I was stopped from dancing—that was a blow. Then I was told I couldn't paint. My father said there was no question of my learning to paint because nude models would pose for the painting classes. Now my father had female students—

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he appreciated *their* work but I was not allowed to paint. This continued for a year or two, and I felt very oppressed.

I had a friend named Nishat who was from Mahboobnagar. We used to write letters to each other, and every letter that I wrote became a poetic expression. My sisters, mother and father read these letters and enjoyed them, but because of a family dispute in 1969 our friendship ended. First I wrote only couplets which my Papa showed to Jeelani Bano and then to Aziz Qaisi, famous Urdu poets in those days. Later Shaaz Tamkanat became my guru. I would visit his house every holiday for three years and learn rhythm and metre. In 1973, one Sunday after a few drinks, he asked me to show him my poems. I happily showed him my work. He then asked me what I thought about Woman. I said, "She is a mother, a life-giving force." Then he asked me what I thought of him. I said "You're a guru, nothing more." That was our last meeting, I never went to him after that. Dr. Akhtar Hasan was an eminent critic. He started reading my work and advised me not to restrict myself to ghazal and rhythm. I then started writing free verse under his guidance and wrote a few poems.

All the sadness and depression that entered my blood seems to have been expressed in my poems. On the surface I lead a very happy life—I am comfortable, I have no problems with my parents, sisters, brothers or anyone, and yet I am not a happy person. Perhaps, given the freedom, I would have been a great dancer or a great painter—instead, I write poems. Even the poems started because of my childhood friend, Nishat. Nishat means happiness, but I was never allowed to meet her. Because I was prevented I started writing poetry. My mother was particular that her daughters study and be self-sufficient. My father may have inspired me but it was really my mother who gave me strength. M.F. Husain (the well-known painter) was also a source of inspiration because he used to paint wherever he went—street-corners, cars, walls, all carried his imprint.

In those days Hyderabad had a culture of *mushairas*. Crowds would flock to hear a *mushaira*. Every year there was one big *mushaira* for which poets like Sahir Ludhianvi and Kaifi Azmi would come. Maqdoom Mohiuddin, a great poet and communist leader, was also present. All these poets met at my parents' house, drank and had intellectual discussions. It was frustrating as girls to stay inside the kitchen,

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to not be allowed to join them. I wrote: "It is true you have seen me in every colour, but these are mere colours, not the real me." Then my father's attitude towards me began to change. He would take me to all the educated women in Hyderabad and encourage me to interact with them. Zeenat Sajida, the well-known literary critic, was one of them. My father wasn't sure that I had grasped the intricacies of rhythm and meter correctly so he took me to Jeelani Bano and Aziz Qaisi. But gradually I began to feel that meter and rhythm were constraints on my emotion. I decided to break away and write free verse. My father would force me to recite at *mushairas* because he wanted the publicity; but standing there in front of that huge audience at fifteen, and reciting in the presence of poets like Kaifi Azmi and Sardar Jaffrey made me feel like a performing monkey. I used to cringe. So I decided to stay home and write, read out poems for radio programmes and publish poetry in papers and magazines. I was also inspired by Ghalib and women like Fahmida Riaz, Parveen Shakir and Kishwar Naheed, but the strongest influence on me was Fahmida Riaz who was a communist and wrote openly. I wanted to write like her. I have never met her, but I am what I am today because her writing laid the foundations for my poetry.

How did marriage and motherhood affect your writing?

In 1975 I was married to a Telugu Muslim who couldn't read or write Urdu. Mine was an arranged marriage. I enjoyed myself in bed with him. I loved myself more than before and lived passionately for seven years. He wanted to marry a woman who was creative so was willing to marry me without a dowry. This annoyed his family. I became aware of myself and my body, and our life was full of music and rhythm. He told me to dance or paint, to do whatever I wanted, but I was too busy living. I was enjoying myself and felt no need to write. Soon I had a beautiful son. I loved him, and ten years later had another child. I hoped it would be a daughter, I wanted her to be a ballet dancer, but it was another boy. My father was upset that I wasn't writing. He even asked me to get a divorce, but I refused. When my father was dying, I wrote a long poem, "Ek Ehsaas hun Main" and read it out to him. He liked it very much and after listening to it, he slipped into a coma. It was terrible watching him die, watching him suffer for twelve days. I

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thought artists shouldn't die. Death is a strange experience—my whole life changed after he died, I felt as if I was dying. I was haunted by his eyes on my face, his touch. I started writing for relief—and that was the beginning of my creative phase.

After my Papa's death I burst forth into poetry. This time I didn't write ghazals like earlier, but allowed my feelings to flow freely. My father's student, Shareef, an art critic, was also my husband's friend and our friendship developed. We read poetry together and visited art galleries, and he grew very close to me. We read about Picasso, and his grotesque "Guernica" influenced me deeply. I read Greek mythology and recognised the similarity between Indian mythology and Greek myths.

This continued for about a year and then we decided to show my poems to a third person. In 1984 my poems were published in the magazine *Sabras*, published by Idara-e-Adabiyat Urdu, and in the magazine *Shair* from Bombay. I also sent my poems to the editor of *Shab-khoon* who rejected them, calling it immature work.

In 1985 a poem of mine was published in *Kitab-Numa*, a literature journal from Delhi. I was thrilled to see it in such an important literary journal—every poet in Hyderabad wants to be published in *Kitab Numa*. After that, every six months until 1990, my poems would be published in *Kitab Numa*.

In the 1980s, slowly but steadily, Urdu poetry began to be influenced by images from the Gulf countries, and in one of the *mushairas* organized by the Hyderabad Literary Forum in 1984, I was called to recite my poems. I recited my poem on Shakuntala, and there was complete silence in the hall. Prof. Sirajuddin said, "This is not a good poem, you should have read something else." Now Prof. Siraj came to my house very often to teach me Hafiz and Ghalib. He tried hard to make me appreciate Iqbal but somehow I couldn't. At one point of time he even called me a Hindu, as I have many native images in my poems, not normally encountered in Urdu literature.

I went to Dr. Moghni Tabassum to publish my poetry because I thought Idara would be the right place for it. The *kitabat* (calligraphing) had started in 1992, but was stopped very soon—the calligrapher refused to calligraph such 'dirty' poems, and he advised Dr. Moghni to keep away otherwise he, too, would become unpopular among

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Urdu-speaking people. My poetry was censored even before it was published, and Dr. Moghni tried to avoid publishing anything that I wrote.

In 1991 I was again invited by the Hyderabad Literary Forum to recite my poems. After the recitation there was a discussion in which a few poets from Delhi also participated. One of them criticized my poem, "Main Nukta Hun" as being totally baseless. He said, "Eve is born from Adam's rib, how can she be the centre of the Universe?" I was asked to respond. I just thanked them for their comments, but this made me write even more angrily about not being bothered by anybody's response. Prof. Sirajuddin and I had heated arguments whenever we discussed poetry, so much so that he said, "You will not be acceptable to an Urdu audience unless you change."

In the 1980s my poems were appreciated because of critics like Akhtar Hasan who had radical ideas. Then suddenly, I don't know why exactly, but a poem that had been greatly appreciated in the '80s was no longer acceptable to the newspapers of Hyderabad in the '90s. They felt that it would not only affect the paper's prestige but also the honour of a great soul, my father, Syed Bin Mohammed. The poem was about his death—I wrote about what happened after death. According to Islam you go to hell or heaven, and in my poem, which was an expression of my passion for my father, he goes to hell. It created a furore. My poetic freedom, my freedom of expression, were gone. What could I do? Everywhere, wherever you go, you are labelled Muslim and you are labelled a woman, a Muslim woman. I started writing poetry about talaq, about the women whose husbands are abroad, about girls who are married to sheikhs in Saudi Arabia, in the Middle East. . .

1992 changed the Urdu literary scene. Poets and writers became very conscious of the imagery, the metaphors that they used. The demolition of the Babri Masjid became the centre of all poetry, so when I wrote poems on women's issues, on talaq, polygamy and violence, the *Kitab Numa* ignored my work—they stopped publishing my poems.

Newspapers in Hyderabad also behaved in the same way. In 1996 when a fundamentalist group, Shabban, did not allow burqa-clad girls to enter the theatre, I wrote a poem called "Burqa" and sent it to

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Siyasat. They were very angry. I organised a meeting at the Press Club in 1997 and recited the same poem in front of an invited Urdu audience—there was dead silence in the hall. Dr. Moghni called it propaganda poetry. Whenever critics and other poets responded like this, I became even more committed to what I was writing and didn't bother too much about their opinions.

My first book, *Lava*, was not taken very seriously by most of these patriarchs, in spite of the fact that I censored many of my poems and published only what I felt was acceptable to an Urdu audience. When I write poems on communal riots they are published and accepted, but whenever I criticise my own community my voice is ignored. On All India Radio I was allowed to recite my poems for ten minutes every six months, but I am not allowed to speak on any sensitive issue. "There are always other poems to recite, don't hurt the feelings of the Urdu audience," I am told.

And your education?

I was a science graduate. My mother wanted me to be a doctor but my father was against it. I wanted to do an MA in Urdu, which I loved, but all my teachers said that I already knew Urdu well and so I should do science. Nearly six or seven years after my marriage I did a master's in English. I loved literature, Shakespeare, Donne, Eliot—I read them all. Then I took a B.Ed. My mother-in-law used to call me a *bhagodi*. I began to teach in a central government school and enjoyed teaching small children very much.

Your identity?

When I was a teenager my father saw a boy following me and whistling, and so he insisted that I wear a burqa. I wore one for three years, but removed it the minute I was inside the girls' bus. Even conservative people who wore burqas were very few in those days—my mother didn't. I was the kind of Muslim who reads namaz twice a year, on Ramzan and Bakr Id. But I loved the dargah culture and sometimes thought of becoming a Sufi. After the Razakar Movement Muslims in Hyderabad were either progressive or reactionary, but Gulf money and culture have altered things here. In 1984 I met Shahnaz (Sheikh), and at around the same time a cousin of mine was married to an old

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man. Soon this became common practice. It hurt me to see fifteen year olds married off to seventy year old men, and I wrote many poems and one play about this. Every other house in Barkas area sends a girl off to Saudi and lives comfortably on the money that she sends home. Sons don't study or work—the girls feed the family.

The riots in Hyderabad in 1989 were terrible, death and bloodshed everywhere. Many of my poems are about that. I was born in a communally volatile area, Sultan Shahi, where during every riot at least fifty people die and houses and schools are burnt down. I have always grown up with Hindu friends, but after 1992 I have suddenly been labelled a Muslim. Since 1985 I have written several plays but it has been difficult to get a theatre group together. Muslim girls are not allowed to act. Drama is body language—all the girls I managed to train would get married and leave.

And language?

Language has been a serious concern for me. I felt that Urdu, especially Dakkani Urdu, was dying, that as a spoken language it might disappear. I decided to write only in Dakkani so that it would be preserved as a literary language. I saw many plays, attended theatre festivals and learnt how to use my language effectively. I also translated many Irish, French and Russian plays into Dakkani, but at a personal level even my language is censored. When I used a word for lust, Prof. Sirajuddin translated it as "arms", and insisted on correcting the word in the text. Every senior poet or writer in Hyderabad wants to correct my language! When I refuse, they say I am not very serious about my writing.

What have been your themes?

Well, the themes have varied. I wrote about relationships—man-woman, sisters and so on—basically on women's issues. As a woman I can only look at things with a woman's eyes, I cannot have a man's perspective. In my plays the man is the villain, the father is the antagonistic figure, so men don't like my work but women appreciate it. Sometimes conservative Muslim men warn me about writing like this, but I say I am only educating people, and carry on.

In 1988, I met Hoshang Merchant, an English poet. We became

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good friends, wrote poetry together and shared thoughts and books. He has translated some of my work, but Hoshang does not appreciate my writing on social issues and so he refuses to translate it. Even he projects only one side of me. His article about me in the *Deccan Chronicle* caused me considerable embarrassment. Each critic looks at a writer from his own point of view and praises or criticizes her without any reference to what the writer's work or milieu is—this paints a partial picture and sometimes does more damage then good.

What is it like, writing poetry?

Often I feel a tremendous urge to write, especially if I haven't written for a few days. I feel very restless. Then I sit down to write, and even if it is only a few lines I feel some relief. Once I write something I just forget about it. But before I write, I dream about it. The whole poem comes to me as a dream, a visual dream. I put it down as it is on paper, without thinking about whether I should write it or not. No conscious effort—I write on paper as I dream. I believe in feelings more than in expression, unless you feel a thing you cannot express it easily. Colours get absorbed in you, you are like a plain mirror, you show everybody what they want to see in you.

Basically, artists are all free. I want to be free. Freedom is very important—if I don't have freedom, I can't work. I work according to my conscience, that is important. I must be satisfied with my own work. I believe all individuals should have a free mind and self-discipline.

When and where do you write?

I usually write early in the morning: when I write, everyone else ceases to exist. The domestic scene rarely affects me—I've never been involved in housework. I write poetry easily, it comes easily to me, but I have no special themes. I even write about the dogs on my street! I have begun a novel and written about 200 pages, but am unable to finish it. Sometimes, if I am in great pain, I can't write. For instance when I see life in the old city and the painful lives the women there lead, I feel numb. I can't write. I am so caught up in the suffering of these burqa-clad women and their helplessness that my pen freezes.

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Maybe I will be able to write in the future, but right now I'm too locked up in the present.

What about your magnum opus?

It will be the novel I have begun! It starts with the Razakar period and the riots at that time—but I stopped writing after '92. I just couldn't continue. Now I want to link it to events in Gujarat. If I can finish that novel satisfactorily, I would be quite happy to die.

Interviewed by Vasanth Kannabiran

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Vasireddy Seeta Devi

VASIREDDY SEETA DEVI (b. 1932) is a progressive writer with a strong sense of social responsibility. Starting life in a village where girls were not allowed to cross the street to go to school, she retired as the director of Jawahar Bal Bhavan. Seeta Devi is a novelist of stature who has raised a storm in political circles, and her writings reflect the political economy of daily life with admirable clarity. Her magnum opus, *Matti Manishi*, portrays the emotional conflict between ossified feudal values and the alienation of capitalist culture with stark realism, rarely surpassed. Her other novel, *Marichika*, was banned, and Seeta Devi accused of having connections with and glorifying the Naxalite movement; the ban was later struck down by the High Court.

Seeta Devi's awards and honours are numerous. She has received the Best Writer Award from the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi five times. She was awarded the Grihalakshmi Swarnakankanam, the Gopichand Award, the Madireddy Sulochana Gold Medal, and Doctor of Letters from two universities. She is a member of the Regional Censor Board, regional advisor to the Central Sahitya Akademi, president of the Tripuraneni Ramaswamy Trust and member, Doordarshan Advisory Board. Seeta Devi was also on the General Body of the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi for five years; on the Sahitya Akademi Women Writers' Advisory Board as member for twenty years, and its secretary for five years.

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Seeta Devi, tell me something about your education.

The course of my education was rather strange—I didn't study in ordinary schools or colleges because of my family. I come from a village called Chebrolu in Guntur district. Upto the fifth class I studied in the street-corner school. The middle school in our village had classes only upto the third form (eighth class) and in those days, girls from our families who were over ten were not allowed to cross the main bazaar road and go to school. So my education ended at the street corner. They said, "That's enough! Now sit at home and learn music instead." This wasn't peculiar to me, it was the state of affairs for most girls in my village. Our function was limited to ceremonial festivals—come festival time and the girls would dress up and go visiting. Weddings, religious ceremonies, feasts, some social visit or other, but for me a festival meant fear. My mother, like other mothers, longed to dress me up in new clothes and jewels and take me with her. I would refuse, be stubborn and get beaten. Do you know why? During these visits they would apply kumkum to your forehead, smear sandalwood paste on your neck and turmeric paste on your feet. When they put flowers in my hair I threw them away—wiped the kumkum from my forehead and broke the bangles they put on my wrists. My mother gave me silver anklets—I said I didn't want them, but she forced me to wear them. I went outside, took them off and threw them into a well. I was almost thrashed to death. Although I was so stubborn I never played games like the others in my age group. I was so detached from my environment that people who saw me called me mad. All our relatives said, "Poor Ranganayakamma! her daughter is completely mad." They would say this in front of me. I used to think, "You are the mad widows, you who think your life is fine and everything is well." I was sure this couldn't be all, there must be more to life than this. Marriage, children, then children's children, serve your mother-in-law and father-in-law—no, no, no! This can't be life. I don't want this life.

Do you remember Suryadevara Rajyalakshmi, the veteran freedom fighter? She belonged to my village. She felt that girls who were forced to stay home should at least learn some Hindi, and so she started a Hindi school. She invited a Hindi pandit from Bihar, Ramananda Sharma, to teach in her school and a few girls like me, who were

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confined by pardah, went there to learn Hindi. After a short while my relatives got after my mother, pecking at her like crows. Although she was unhappy about this, my mother asked me to stop going to school. I wept continuously for two days, refusing food and water. When Ramananda Sharma heard that I would not be going back he told Rajyalakshmi, "If that girl doesn't come to school you can close it down. I'll go back to Bihar." She came to my house and managed to persuade my mother to send me back.

Soon it was time for the exams. The middle school in the village was the examination centre for the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha's Rashtrabhasha exam, and so I had to cross the main bazaar to write it. Again the same old problem! The caste elders said our girls cannot cross the street. So the Hindi master then obtained permission to make his house a centre and conduct the examination there. Two years later when I went for the Hindi teacher's training course, they were astonished to hear that I was from this village! The General Secretary, Moturi Satyanarayana, said that if a girl from there, and particularly from the Vasireddy family, had come out that meant that revolution had arrived in Andhra Pradesh!

But how did you manage to move out of the village and your family environment?

Venkatasubbamma, who also came from Munipalle to study Hindi at our school, once wrote to me from Madras and I wrote back saying that I wanted to go there. I asked her to find me a job. Her reply was, "Good lord! Girls from that family working! Your people will come and slaughter me. If they think it's too much trouble to come this far they'll just go to the next village and beat up my people." I sent her a long reply pleading with her to somehow get me out of this village. I said if she didn't get me a job I'd be married off to some fellow, and I had no intention of getting married. She had to rescue me from this danger. Then she said that she had found me a job in a Marathwadi school as a Hindi teacher and asked me to set off for Madras immediately. I was so thrilled, it was as if I had scaled Mt. Everest! I showed my mother the letter—my father was a disinterested Dharmaraj—she had no objection, but she was scared. She needed moral support to let me go away. That was really difficult to get. Her eldest brother

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ran a hotel in Tenali so she sent word to him, very nervous, and surprisingly, he agreed to take me to Madras. I went for an interview in the Sanathana Dharma Hindi Kanya Patashala. The school secretary took one look at me and said, "This girl can't be employed, she is hardly fifteen." He wouldn't believe that I was eighteen! I had opposed so many people, shown real courage by getting to Madras, and the thought of going back was humiliating. I went to meet the committee chairman. His heart probably melted at the sight of my tears; the secretary was not able to reject his recommendation, but he said the job was only for ten months. He terminated me after ten months. Then I joined the Jain School as a teacher at Rs. 50 a month. While teaching I was also taking the higher exams of the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, and after two years they appointed me Vice Principal of the Hindi Teachers' Training College. It was a big job, I was very young and all the trainees were senior teachers, old, with many years of service.

But they listened to me. We all lived in the same hostel and they treated me like a young kid. There was a funny incident once. Chintamani and Durgabai Deshmukh (important public figures) visited our college. Deshmukh looked at me and then at all the women sitting in the class and, laughing, asked, "Who looks after all these women in the hostel?" My boss, Satyanarayana, pointed to me and said, "She does." Deshmukh burst out laughing and said, "This girl looks after the well-being and safety of all these adults! Who looks after her?" Satyanarayana retorted that I didn't need any looking after!

I continued to study and took the Madras SSLC exam privately, then the Intermediate, B.A. and M.A. exams from Nagpur university, also privately. I also sat for the Sahitya Ratna exam conducted by the Allahabad Sahitya Sammelan—the Sahitya Ratna carries more value in north India then the Hindi M.A. I passed all the higher exams in Hindi held in north India and continued to work at the same time.

When did you write your first story?

"Sambayya Pelli", written in 1952, was my first story. I wrote it in a hostel room of the Hindi Prachar Sabha and it was published in *Andhra Prabha*, a weekly. I was so encouraged by this that I wrote a series of stories after that. I sent one to the Inter-Collegiate competition, about

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life on the pavements of Sowcarpet. It won the first prize. Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao was one of the judges and he said, "This story is not like one by a fresh student. At this age they write romances. Reading this story I feel there is something wrong with this student," (he was a sub-editor with *Andhra Jyothi*, the monthly magazine), but he encouraged me to write for them. My first book, published in 1954 by Desi Prachuranalu, was *Vasireddy Seeta Devi Kathalu*. They had already published Gopichand's and Kutumba Rao's stories, mine was the eleventh in the series.

What about your interest in theatre?
I loved theatre and used to act in all the plays of the Hindi Prachar Sabha—I still have the silver medals I got then. I directed an all-woman play for the Madras Inter-College Competition, written by Atreya. Ananthasayanam's daughter, Padmavathi, acted as the heroine; she got the best actor, and I got the best director award for that play. When I moved to Hyderabad in the course of my duties I was invited as a judge to many of the competitions organised by theatre groups there, and also got a diploma in theatre arts. I directed a play, *Rajeevam*, and staged it at Ravindra Bharathi.

How did you manage to balance your work, theatre and writing?
I gave up writing after I came to Hyderabad, I didn't write anything from 1956-1963.

When did you start writing again?
When Gopala Chakravarthi, the editor of the government magazine, *Andhra Pradesh*, insisted that I write for the magazine, I wrote my novel, *Adavi Malle*. What I say in the novel is that lineage, family, caste, status, blood, inheritance are not important—what matters is upbringing, environment, and the social and economic conditions which mould individual character.

Did it need a lot of courage to write your novel, Samatha?
Yes, that novel created a storm in the state's political circles. It made political leaders, their sycophants and fixers and unethical officials get really hot under the collar. All the characters in that novel were

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people I saw around me, people I knew who knew me. I tried to show how a person who has tasted only rejection suddenly acquires authority, and then gets people around him to sacrifice their dignity in order to climb the political ladder. I also tried to see how an individual with lofty ideals and firm principles begins to slide when he enters politics. I wanted to look at political corruption. I think it is a writer's responsibility to examine politics and power and expose the corruption in them.

Did you ever write about the condition of women?

The condition of women in my time was really terrible. They couldn't appear before men, couldn't talk in front of them, had to answer softly if asked a question. Men would beat up their wives, drag them out by the hair and abuse them. We would watch as children. We had a neighbour called Mangamma who would scream in pain while her husband thrashed her. One day her daughter and son-in-law arrived while she was being beaten up and put a stop to it. A little later she came to borrow some food for them, but there was nothing in the house. We gave her some rice and dal and curds. The next morning there was a huge commotion—Mangamma had jumped into the village pond and ended her life. They said she had turned into a ghost, that her spirit was sitting on the wall, that it had possessed someone. All these things filled me with fear, and I have written about them.

You have remained single?

Yes. I was afraid of marriage even as a young girl, I used to cry at the thought of it. When the village folk said, "Bring that Raghavayya's daughter here, we'll get her married," I would be really scared. Jokes about marriage made me sick. I never went to the temple even as a child. My father had refused to marry and became a Gosai (sannyasi), but his elder brother was a spendthrift and began to sell the land. My aunt tracked my father down, brought him back, had the land transferred to his name and then forced him to get married. My mother used to recite and sing poetry beautifully, but I wanted to break out of that environment somehow. After I went to Madras, work and education were a real struggle. Life itself became a series of examinations. Writing examinations and writing stories—this was my whole

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life. Even when I grew older I didn't think of marriage. All the men I was acquainted with seemed younger than me, they lacked maturity. Somerset Maugham says in *Summing Up* that if he found someone drawing close to him he became afraid and withdrew. My nature was like that, too.

Were you ever influenced by leftist ideas?

I was acquainted with the communist movement when I was very young, and in Madras, Darisi Chenchayya* used to visit our house. Our walls were covered with calendars and pictures of film stars, and we replaced them with those of Lenin and Marx. Chenchayya gave me Gorky's *Mother* to read, and wanted to send me to Kalpana Datta for training. Kambampati junior** spent most of his time underground, in our house, which was full of Marxist literature. I was a courier, carrying letters, and my 'tech' name was Pratibha. But I had no real sense of the significance of my work—I thought I was just being a postman. A packet would be handed over to me, I would hide it among my books and carry it to the Hindi Prachar Sabha where another man would come and take it away. My cousin, Devabhaktuni Narayana Rao, was removed from a senior post in the Reserve Bank because he was a communist. Two comrades were arrested from my house; they came for me, too, to the Hindi Prachar Sabha, but simply warned me because I was so young. They took all my books to Chulai Police Station. My grandmother reached a stage where any red jacket frightened her—she set fire to all the red books because the constables were coming.

You said you stopped writing for some time and then resumed—why was that?

In those days, being in a government job meant you had to take permission even to write a story. I got fed up of this and so gave up writing for a long time. Gopichand and I wrote about the life of the same individual, he wrote *Gadiyapadina Talupulu* and I wrote *Samatha.*

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* A member of the Gadar Party in the U.S., and later a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

** Kambampati Satyanarayan was a member of the CPI.

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He wrote first, but I swore to write a better novel than him. The two novels are quite different—I had observed the life of the heroine in *Samatha* at close quarters because she was based on a real-life person. Her name was Neelakanteshwarammalu, she was from Eluru, the mother of five children. She left Eluru and ran away with Alluri Satyanarayana Raju; when he became a minister she tasted authority. People flocked to her and touched her feet to get a seat to the Legislative Council and Assembly, and for jobs. Seeing all this I couldn't resist writing about it. Once even her husband came to her! A man who had tortured her for her intelligence came back to her for favours, and her relatives who had been gossiping about her running away began hovering around her. The chief minister then was Damodaram Sanjeevayya. He read *Samatha* and asked me whether he was really such an ineffective chief minister. Alluri read the novel and asked me, "Why did you say that I ran away with this man?" "It isn't my saying it, that is what the other characters think," I replied. She wasn't too bothered about anything else.

And Marichika?

Why did I write *Marichika*? The popular assumption at the time was that young people took to narcotics or Naxalism just for the thrill of it. I wanted to change that opinion, to show that they joined the Naxalite movement for a sense of direction. I also wanted to say that annihilating a few people didn't bring about a revolution. Perhaps someone in the movement would have written more dispassionately. Well, it was banned—and there are reasons for the ban. The letter that the novel's heroine writes to her father is not a fiction—it is an exact replica of the letter that Snehalatha (a Naxalite who was killed in an encounter) wrote to her father. Similarly, there was an encounter near Pakal Lake where Ramanarasayya was killed and I described that, too, in detail. After the novel was banned I was reverted from being deputy director to assistant director. The Democratic Lawyers' Association filed a case and K.G. Kannabiran (a prominent civil rights lawyer) appeared in my defence. They revoked my reversion in a Tribunal the moment I went to court.

But some people bore a grudge against me and tried to get at me this way, others said there was nothing in the book, that I had

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engineered the ban for fame and popularity. Actually I suffered quite a loss—reversion, court cases, so much energy and expense. It was the publisher who made a profit by selling the book at a higher price. The police and CID would come to my house every day and ask stupid questions like why I had Chinese literary magazines. But I was quite bold. The issue of the ban was raised in the Assembly and even the Congress MLAs supported me. After that the harrassment stopped.

Do you think that women's writing is different from men's?
Women writers can deal with certain sensitive issues that male writers can't, but they also suffer from certain limitations. Men will never admit that women can write powerfully, they ignore their writing. No one paid any attention to *Matti Manishi,* and my being a woman and a non-brahmin was another factor—no novel of mine was ever serialised in a popular magazine. I wrote satires in *Prajatantra* under the name Mitravinda—I wasn't sure whether I could write satire and whether it would be up to the mark, so I used a pen name.

What events in your life have affected you deeply?
My greatest grief and most painful experience was my mother's death. I thought I wouldn't be able to see her last rites, that I couldn't bear the sight. I wasn't brought up as a girl—I couldn't cook, I never kept house. My mother bought all my saris and toiletries, I didn't know a thing. She looked after me as long as she lived. I went out in the morning and there was my work, my meetings, my theatre. My mother provided me with physical and moral support right through. I wonder whether I would have come so far without her.

Interviewed by Volga

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Ilampirai

ILAMPIRAI (b. 1971) is the pen name of Panchavarnam, a middle school teacher who lives in Chennai but comes from a remote village in Thanjavur district. Ilampirai started life as a farm-hand. Her poems have an alliterative quality and combine the rhythm of folk songs with a contemporary sensibility, echoing the voices of rural women toiling in the fields. Full of song and laughter, in spite of the hardships of her life, Ilampirai has a spontaneity and courage that are rare today. Her three volumes of poetry, *Ilavenil Padalgal, Maunakkudu* and *Nisaptham* are significant as the first Tamil female voice from a rural milieu. Ilampirai is sharply aware of her situation as a woman writer—she is perhaps one of the very few women who is given a place of honour at Kaviyarangams (poetry recitals).

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Can you tell us something about your childhood and education?
I come from a remote village, a very small village. There were only about seven houses in it, but it had over seven ponds. Water, trees, flowers, all over. Anyway, people were never at home so loneliness was almost a given. The only time we left the village was to go to our native place near Ramnad to pray to our family deity, Ayyanar. My mother would take all of us, buy tickets for some, and the rest would travel ticketless. It was a trip we waited for eagerly. We lived in Kothangudi, near Tiruvarur, Thanjavur district. The family moved here to escape drought. There were two buses to Sattiyakudi each day, three kilometres from our village. The school was there. The school teacher had come to our home asking my parents to admit me. We were five girls and one boy. My brother was the eldest. He went to school in Valivalam. My sisters didn't want to go to school, they hid whenever the teacher came. I was the fifth in the household, they named me Panchavarnam (five colours) because of that. Ilampirai came later, when I started publishing my poems. I showed some interest in studies though my parents weren't keen on educating a girl. When I insisted, they gave me an old notebook of my brother's and a yellow bag and took me to school. The first day we went, the school was closed. My father started shouting, saying that the teacher had been irresponsible. Actually, it was a Sunday! But he was very angry and asked me to go home. He was a cattle-broker. After that the teacher came again asking for "that dark girl" to be admitted. Then I went. I remember only playing at school.

Once there was a huge cyclone. The whole village was flooded. I never really cared about learning much. It was only in the VIIth standard when a teacher told us inspiring stories of scientists, poets, etc. and we got to learn our English alphabet that I started getting interested in studies. But my family began dissuading me from going to school. I wept and wept. The village landlord came home and persuaded my parents to allow me to continue, so I managed to finish teacher training in the middle of all this. And then three years of unemployment.

When did you start writing?
Right from a young age I used to compose songs. There were songs

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all around me. My mother used to sing songs of lament (*oppari*). She had lost two of her brothers, so at night she used to sing of how she had no support for herself or her children because all the uncles were dead. And in the fields there were wonderful songs sung every day. I used to love them. They sang about the Venmani comrades. This was the bloodcurdling atrocity against agrarian labourers in Venmani in 1968; 44 people in all were burnt to death in a hut where they were all huddled together. One would lead and others would follow. (*She sings*)

In that region the communist movement was very strong. The labourers were aware, but not literate. They used to change the song if they saw the landlord at a distance . . . sing praising his wealth and prosperity! Many songs were very tragic. Even men who were transplanting would sing. A salt vendor would sing of a daughter-in-law's atrocities. . .

How did I learn these songs? Even if you go to school, you can't escape working in the fields. Specially during harvest season they let us do as much as we can before we go to school. Or we run to the fields as soon as we get back, otherwise the family won't get its share. We get one-seventh of the harvest. Studying was always secondary right till I finished my teachers' training. Almost all the families were in the same boat. Parents would say, you work and take the wages. My mother was forever frustrated because we were all girls. Work was almost never-ending.

Do you sing your poems or read them?

I always sing, and all of them are songs for gods. Once I was invited to participate in a debate. Everyone said I was good. Then there was an invitation to take part in a Kaviyarangam in Tirukkuvalai. This was in 1988. That was my first-ever exposure to people who read and spoke about literature. They gave me addresses of many little magazines and asked me to send my poems to them so I started sending my poems on postcards. There was nothing except a radio at home. Most often, it doesn't work or there will be no batteries. There is an interesting story about that radio—when we first got it, my mother wouldn't allow anyone except my brother to operate it. Once he switched it off she would cover it with a basket, like a chicken!

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What were your themes in your poems?

Dowry. One of my sisters returned home because of dowry problems. All around I kept hearing about it so I wrote a lot of poems on that. One poem was published in *Sundara Sugan* and I was very happy. I had already chosen my pseudonym, Ilampirai. Some of my teachers gave me collections of Bharatidasan, Vairamuthu and Metha*, and I tried writing like them. Sometimes when I write about my father or mother, I read my poems out to them. When I read out my poem about my mother, she said that all I did was to just record things she had said. "Is this all that poetry is about?" she asked. Meanwhile, I went to Trichy AIR (All India Radio) as an upcoming poet. My father was very happy. The whole family would sit around the radio waiting to hear my voice.

When was your first volume of poems published?

All my songs were compiled and published under the title *Ilavenil Padalgal* (Songs of Spring) by a local press called Thiru. Vi. Ka press. We had the book-release in my school itself. That's where Rajaguru, who later became my husband, reviewed my collection. Everyone in my family was happy. As long as I didn't ask for any help, there was no problem in writing. Of course, I couldn't keep the light burning late in the night, so I would have to wait till dawn to put down anything I had in mind. Apart from that there were no other problems. Nor did they know what I wrote.

What about your marriage?

It seems Rajaguru wanted an inter-caste marriage—a common friend told me that. I, too, wanted to move away from caste restrictions. He wrote to me. I knew my family would not approve so I just left home and got married. His family knew about it. I came back home and convinced my parents. I just lied to them about his caste. He was an

* Bharatidasan was a Tamil nationalist poet in the first half of the twentieth century; Vairamuthu is a popular poet and film song-writer; and Metha is a modern poet of the Vanampadigal school which began in the 1970s and called for socially committed verse.

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engineer, into politics. Somehow, we couldn't see eye to eye. He couldn't accept my poems . . . not that my ideas were very clear then. He didn't want me to have any other social contacts. Both our hearts grew dry, there was no moisture at all. He was also into wife-beating, almost for everything. In '95, I got a job in Thiruvarur and came to live here with my son. He, too, got a transfer and came here, and he started ill-treating me. "If you speak feminism, fend for yourself," he would say. He would take part of my salary but wouldn't take on any household expenses or chores. I couldn't take it any longer. I never really understood him at all. It was a nightmare for three years. So I told him I wanted a divorce. He had such a conservative attitude towards women nor was he attached to the child. We got a mutual divorce—there was nothing painful about the separation.

When did you write that poem about your divorce?

After this experience . . . it was like black curtains all around me, that's when I wrote it. Actually I included that poem in my third collection, *Nisaptham* (Silence). I gave it to a friend in Chennai to get it published and when they wanted a poem for *Nakkeeran* (a popular magazine), he sent this one. When it was published Rajaguru was furious. He came all the way here and broke my hand—my right wrist was fractured. I couldn't even mix tamarind juice for months. Even now, my right hand is not strong enough. Actually, I hadn't insulted him in the poem. I thought he would care for the child at least when we separated, but I was betrayed. And I expressed that. But he felt insulted. It has made me very conscious of my writing. These days I find writing very difficult.

What subjects do you want to write about?

Anything that affects me, all my personal experiences. Whoever could have imagined that I would be betrayed a second time! This other man was so understanding, I believed our marriage was legal but suddenly I find that he had gone and got married to someone else! I exposed him, had him arrested (with the help of the National Federation of Indian Women), but the shock and pain remain. People don't want you to lead your life as you are. Now I have these two children,

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my job and of course my poetry, and a lot of lessons that life has taught me. But I don't want to surrender, I don't want my being to be lost.

What about social issues . . . ?
I have started writing short stories. I find them more appropriate when I want to explain things better. I have also begun writing a novel. I think genre is a matter of choosing what the content demands.

How have your poems changed with your urban living?
I still think rural life is my forte. It is only over the last two years that I have been in Chennai. I still dream rural scenes, but I want to write about this present life as well—it might give me a new language.

What are your views on awards and all such recognition?
Appreciation has become so scarce these days, especially for poets—the awards instituted for poetry are given by poets themselves! They are certainly thrilling, but the question really is about whether the right person is given recognition at the right time.

In the past five years there have been many women who have started writing poetry in Tamil—how do you place yourself in relation to them?
My poetry is similar to most of these women in the choice of women's experiences as their content, but I am alone in that I record a rural reality, while most others are from urban contexts. I put my world into my poetry.

How have your collections been received?
Generally quite positively! Sometimes, when I meet them personally, people give their comments. There are some who feel that I am recognised because I am a woman. Many young men, especially, feel that they are not being recognised. Very rarely do you get serious comments. People are fixed in their opinions about one's work—they think I write only about rural life, but I don't think it is right to demarcate like that. I just want to be sincere about what I write.

Sneha has agreed to publish my next collection. But I feel very

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lonely. If I write a poem, I have no one to share it with. I'm the reader and the writer. Though there are a lot of friends, I am very hesitant. So I read and re-read to decide, sometimes take up to six months to finish a poem. I keep writing the same poem that I had written the previous day. It's almost like nurturing a life into birth. I can't write made-to-order poems, and I don't think I can stop writing.

Interviewed by Mangai

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Shafeeq Fatima Shera

Born in 1930 in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Shafeeq Fatima Shera moved with her family to Nagpur. Despite his Master's degree in history, Shera's father was against sending his daughters to school; western education, he believed, would destroy their creativity. Shera was taught Persian by her mother and Arabic by a tutor at home. She also acquired knowledge of Quranic exegesis and Islamic traditions. After Partition the family decided to move with the times and turned to modern education; Shera got a Master's degree in Urdu. During their stay in Aurangabad she also picked up Hindi, Marathi and Dakkani; her grounding in Persian and Arabic combined with her knowledge of the Quran added depth to her poetry and provided a unique flavour to her language. Shera grew up with conflicting traditions—a conservative and orthodox father, and a liberal and progressive mother who was an unpublished poet. Shera's attachment to her family, including her stern father, is fierce and loyal.

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Tell us something about your childhood and family. . .

As far as our ancestral home is concerned I can't single out anyone place. We lived in Nagpur but our culture was that of Uttar Pradesh. We lived close to the forest, that made our town very green. The people I met were simple adivasi women and I liked them. School we didn't know—we were not sent to school. Often we would be sitting near an oil crusher; if there were women dancing outside, we would watch; or we would read novels by Premchand others—no one stopped us. By not going to school, I was able to watch life closely among the people around us. Our father was very conservative, he didn't want to send us to school. He thought school education would alienate us from our culture, that we would get westernised. He also thought western education kills originality. He was a typical Oriental—he thought the world was too materialistic, that someday it would grow small and dark.

The atmosphere in our house was very simple. It was a middle class household and yet we lived in an intellectual environment. I learnt the Quran by heart. I read every story in such a way that it came alive. I acquired some distinction in Arabic and Persian and did a detailed reading of literature at home—we had a very good library. I read the *Kuliyat* of Nazeer Akbarabadi and the *marsias* of Anees. I held the *marsias* close to my heart, they moved me greatly. Moharram was a time of mourning though we are not Shias. My mother's family was highly cultured and civilized. My maternal grandfather passed his matriculation in 1903 and became a government servant. My grandfather and uncle joined the freedom struggle—they were both freedom fighters, very attached to Gandhiji, Mohd. Ali, Shaukat Ali and others. When my mother came to Aurangabad and heard slogans against Gandhi, she flew into a rage—she couldn't bear to hear a single word against Gandhi.

My father and my mother were very different in temperament and beliefs, yet we were brought up well. My mother was a poet in Persian and Urdu, her name was Zaferunissa Begum. She was a good poet, but she couldn't publish because of my father. Nobody encouraged her. My mother didn't educate her daughters. When I, her fourth daughter, was born she decided to bring me up and *educate me like a male child.* I memorised scores of lines of verse, I was given instruc-

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tion in *Hadis* and learnt the meaning of the Quran through translations.

We lived close to nature with plenty of open air. Ours was simple, honest living in an environment of tolerance, permeated with love and affection. We enjoyed considerable freedom. No one interfered with my poetry writing, no one at home opposed it and I had no difficulty getting my poems published. I could meet editors of magazines freely, and there were no restrictions on meeting poets and men of letters who visited us. Much of my poetry was written during this period, before marriage, in the parental home at Aurangabad. I was mostly published in *Saba* (Hyderabad) *Shahrah* and *Saughat* (Bangalore). There were several other magazines, too, but they were not too open to the kind of poetry I wrote. I once showed one of my poems to my father who said, "It's a good poem but who will understand it?"

In 1948 we moved to Aurangabad. I passed my matriculation and entered service. Then I did my B.A. and M.A.—so I did get some modern education. I read Marathi, read *Kusum Agraj*. When my marriage took place I was a college lecturer. I didn't want to marry but my younger sister forced me to—something I never wanted. I did not want to leave the free environment at home because I knew I wouldn't find it anywhere else. That is one reason why I didn't want to marry. It was only my younger sister's insistence that made me agree.

My in-law's home was not too encouraging or congenial, but my husband was a good-natured, well-bred man, a university professor. He left me to myself. Whether I wanted to write poetry or not, it was my choice. I was grateful for this and so took up my pen. My verse collection, *Afaq-e-Nava* (The World of Sounds) was largely composed during this period. When the magazine *Sher-o-Hikmat* came out in Hyderabad my poetry got a good response, but literary circles in Hyderabad were generally unhelpful. Court culture had generated a general atmosphere of sycophancy—one had to have a patron to promote one's writing and the patron usually determined one's literary attitudes. This harmed the literary circles more than the writers they neglected. Before marriage I had adopted the practice of first reading out my poem to poets and writers and then sending it for publication. This had to be abandoned after marriage because there were no poets who visited my husband's home. I started sending them

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directly for publication. As I generally avoided company and did not go to literary functions or *mushairas*, I began to be known as haughty and conceited. My in-laws' house was a traditional home. After I had children more adjustments had to be made in an already crowded house. There was no chance here of enjoying the open air and charm of a Panchukki or an Ellora with its caves. Nevertheless, I managed to write some poetry while putting covers on schoolbooks or doing the daily chores of the household. I even learnt something like cooking biryani only after coming to my husband's house. Caught in such a routine I had to chase time to catch it, but I endured all this with patience, looking after everyone's comfort and giving no one a chance to complain. I became a dutiful housewife. The real Shera lay somewhere else, in scattered sheets of paper.

But then the real Shera decided to have all her correspondence directed to her college address and to post her letters personally by walking over to the post office. When my children grew up and saw the great regard that poets and literary men had for me, they thought the poets were closer to me than my own close relatives. I told them they were right.

Did you have any role models in your younger days?
Well, if there were they were only the creation of my imagination. I couldn't totally devote myself to an ideal personality like the great poet Amir Khusro could to Hazrat Nizamuddin, the Sufi saint. I can love intensely but there's always a slight distance between me and the object of my love. Scattered qualities or even some stray personalities have provided me with temporary 'role models', but even my mother who was an excellent housewife—I couldn't be like her. My sisters were very good at studies but I never thought of becoming like them. . . I didn't want to be like anyone. I liked my father very much but he wasn't a model for me, either. I preferred to remain myself.

When did you first start writing poetry?
I wrote my first poem for my elder sister. It was entitled "Nazrana" (Gift) and was just like another poem of mine, "Sada ba Sahra" (Cry in the Wilderness). I must have been 19 or 20. It was a rhymed poem, although earlier I had thought of rhyme as an unnecessary encum-

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brance. The first of my poems to be published was "Faseel-e-Aurangabad" (The City-wall of Aurangabad) in 1952, in *Shahrah*. This brought me recognition as a poet for the first time, but there were many obstacles in my poetic career. I could write a whole book on them, but I ignored them! Writing poetry was generally regarded as a socially irresponsible act, both for boys and girls, but girls particularly. Most often it was women who were against girls writing poetry, perhaps because of jealousy, but usually with the excuse that it was immoral for girls to write poetry. Men, whether fathers, brothers or husbands do not like it if their daughters, sisters or wives write poetry. They always want to assert their authority vis-a-vis women. My family would be proud of a male member if he wrote poetry but not if I, a female, did so. Given that attitude, what help can one expect from them in the matter of publishing one's poetry? And if you seek help outside the family circle fresh problems crop up.

This attitude causes so much pain. First of all you are suspected of some ulterior motive or design, then publishers are often unfair to a woman writer and act in a high-handed way. Whom can you complain to? One is helpless. Take my example—I approached a reputed publishing house to have a collection of my poems published at my own expense. After it was published a huge bundle of books was sent to me, something I hadn't expected. After all, my house is not a book shop! They could at least have sent them to centres like Aligarh or Mumbai where the books could have sold.

"Faseel-e-Aurangabad"—tell us a little about it.

I wrote the "Faseel" in 1953 just after the "police action". People were lamenting the end of monarchy and the royal court. History had reached a point where the court had become a symbol of community identity. Looking back, I found that when the Darbar first came into existence it was not recognized as such by the community; this made me change my attitude towards the Darbar—the end of the Darbar is not the end of the community. The court has disappeared but the *ummah* remains.

What are the sources of your poetic inspiration?

Oppression in any form, undue restraint, the dos and don'ts of

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society, restrictions on personal freedom, cruelties in the world around, tyranny. Beauty has been my quest and inspiration, beauty of words, of human personalities, of nature, of ideals, but with this there's also the consciousness of transience, of mortality. Everything decays and declines. This gave rise to a desire for survival within me, a search for permanence. The love of permanence has been the motivation for my poetry and its inspiration from the beginning. In childhood, the clay toys with which I played drove me to look for something that was durable, and it was from this broken world of toys that I learnt to give my love to something that was more enduring. I discovered that what never died was love. In childhood my love was limited to the members of my family. I have given my family boundless love, inspite of the high-handedness and injustice that I suffered at their hands. I responded to injustice and oppression with defiance, but I never gave up my love for them. I continued to love them intensely and endlessly.

One day, when I was ten years old, I was sweeping the front of the house and raising a lot of dust. My father saw this and slapped me. That night I boiled with rage. I wanted to build a hut in the midst of nature and live in it like the Persian poet, Sadi, once did. Or I would think of running over to another writer, Hali, who wrote the famous *Musaddas*. I loved the figure of the poet as it emerged from his poem. Hali belonged to an earlier age but that hardly mattered. These were the crazy ideas that came to me at night, but by the next morning I had forgotten everything. But I lived in fear, too. Our family was not well off, we had only four pairs of clothes and made our own clay toys. (One fear was that the girls of the family might never get married—our parents never thought of developing contacts for the sake of finding alliances for their daughters, they were so unworldly.) But I found that fear can also lead to fearlessness, just as light is born of darkness.

And so, poetry can be born in reaction to oppression. Living in an atmosphere that is suffocating one can dream of a wide open world. Whatever the poetry and wherever it may exist, it is always a spring that rises from the soil of love. Love changes its nature in different phases of life. In childhood it is mute and relates to imaginary beings. Later a girl's love for her female friends may, by chance, find a voice—

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this is what we call poetry. There was a beautiful woman in our neighbourhood who was consumptive—I fell in love with her, she was like the setting sun for me.

Has the Quran been a source of inspiration for you?
Parents teach their children the Quran because this book becomes a life-long companion and friend, and they have the confidence that it will remain with their children as a constant guide throughout their lives. Once you are familiar with the Quran you can never feel lonely or forsaken. It is a library in itself, its words reflect the boundless immensity of existence. I have always felt that however much we know about the Book there is always something more we need to know, and when we try to learn more, suddenly a window is thrown open on a new meaning and we are left wondering why we hadn't seen this truth earlier. When one feels forsaken and lost one starts worrying and seeking solace in all sort of theories—then the Quran comes to mind. We turn to it to find fresh meaning in life. The Quran is a compendium of life in all its manifestations, we cannot call it a mere collection of fantasies or imaginary writing. The Quran gives new meaning to death, the fear of which has always haunted mankind. The world of the Quran is the world of hope. Here mankind becomes a human family, and national boundaries mere legalities. The history that the Quran projects is the history of humanity without regard to country, race or nation.

Your poems also have figures from Hindu mythology. . .
I have read the *Gita* in Marathi, and my father's library contained voluminous tomes of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and one of my poems, "Shafi-ul-uman" has allusions to the *Gita*.

Your poems have great intensity and passion—is this love?
I will have to think. I have never lost my heart to anyone. I'm grateful to God that I have had the opportunity to meet and know some fine and remarkable people, but none of them made my heart beat faster. I found it difficult to develop an attachment to anyone—I thought I didn't deserve it. Occasionally I felt someone was getting close to me, but fate willed otherwise. Sometimes ideological differences inter-

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vened, sometimes something else. Perhaps it was the will of God. I have alluded to this in my poem "Ufaq-dar-Ufaq" (Horizon to Horizon).

The ways part, distances widen
One walks on without a caravan, without torches or bells,
It may be terrible but one has to walk on
For that's destiny, and companionship
Is a favour which is given and received unsought

The fact is that our concept of love is all wrong. If love means man's dominance over woman it is bound to create problems. In love a woman makes sacrifices, endures things with patience. It does not occur to men that a woman too has ideals of her own. I regard love as a woman's right, she should never be deprived of it. I have deep sympathy for girls who remain unmarried, but I am not in favour of free love. I am also against homosexuality, which in the West is being turned into a right. This attitude towards homosexuality which is being exported to us by the West is one of the results of globalisation.

My poem, "Sada ba Sahra" (Cry in the Wilderness) is autobiographical, full of the desire to let go. It is the 'season' of love, and the fields are green with young grass. The speaking voice in the poem is that of a young girl pleading with an intimate friend to give up her seclusion and self-denial, to come out of the prison she has created for herself, to open her heart to love.

Has your poetry been influenced or obstructed by any censorship, external or self-imposed?

Well, if I find that an idea looks green and raw I exercise my discretion and drop it. Otherwise I write freely, without worrying about what others may say. My pen never stops or wavers because I fear criticism. I regard writing poetry as a responsible act, I never write to gain popularity. As long as there are magazines I know I will receive support from them. Sometimes I don't write for months because there is a lack of good publications—but my poetry is not at the mercy of periodicals. Sometimes I exercise self-censorship as a result of family and social pressures—nothing that I write should offend any sensibility. Not offending is a condition of my writing. There can be a kind

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of pardah in your mental make-up, a shying away from exposure. Often this is a result of male attitudes, a kind of superiority or condescension when talking or writing about a woman's literary work. This has often resulted in opposition or indifference to my work—not much attention has been paid to it. Female envy is also a factor of censorship—women in our society are often suspicious of intelligence or talent in other women, so I avoid participating in *mushairas* or public poetry reading sessions. The progressive coterie who thought that nothing without a strong social commitment was worth publishing, also stood in my way.

Yes, there have been frustrations in my life, but I didn't bother too much about them. I enjoyed male company, but because I feared petty insinuations I was careful and remained aloof. *Sharafat* means something to me—a lot of one's restraints come from within.

I once had a close friendship with a famous Urdu poet. When he fell seriously ill (he lived in a different city) I wanted to send a pigeon to get news of his health. I could not rush to him to find out how he was, I would rather have sent a pigeon.

Don't you feel isolated and lonely?

Once a person grows familiar with the Quran she can never feel lonely or forsaken. This has been my sustaining power, it has made me independent and self-sufficient.

Do women poets write differently from men?

The early women poets wrote in a male idiom, they were following a tradition which was predominantly male. There was no individuality in what they wrote. For my part I write spontaneously, in my own voice. I am not even conscious that I am writing as a woman. But yes, women today are assertive. But they, too, are dependent on male appreciation without knowing it, whether it be Kishwar Naheed or Parveen Shakir. A poet is a poet, the woman or man label should be dropped, and yet women have miles to go before they find their rightful place—a place envisaged in the Quran centuries ago.

Interviewed by Jameela Nishat and Sirajuddin

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T. Sunandamma

T. Sunandamma (b. 1917) is one of the few women to have made a mark in the genre of humorous literature Kannada. At a time when there were hardly any schools for girls, she managed to study upto intermediate thanks to the encouragement of her liberal parents and her own grit and determination. Her experiences as a schoolgirl are adventures in themselves. It was during this period that Sunandamma began writing. Since her father was highly placed in government service, she had access to a number of books. She lived in various towns in Karnataka as her father kept getting transferred from place to place.

Married very early, at the age of 11, and able to study by default (since she had to stay at her mother's place as her husband continued his studies elsewhere), she indulged in adventures of many other kinds, quite unusual for her times—like playing tennis.

Sunandamma, who wrote about serious issues as a schoolgirl, took to humorous writing after she settled down to family life in Bangalore. Egged on by her brother she wrote an article for the first humour magazine in Kannada, *Koravanji*, which began publication in 1942. She wrote hundreds of articles for the magazine throughout the 25 years of its existence, and became an established figure in the genre of humorous literature.

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With restricted mobility and limited access to the world beyond her home in the early years of her writing career, her humour was essentially 'domestic' in nature. The husband and wife who inhabit many of her writings—Sarasu and Mailariah—represent a stereotypical middle class couple. Sunandamma says that she was inspired by the foibles of the middle-class life she saw around her in Basavanagudi, the Brahmin-dominated area in south Bangalore in which she lived during those years. The ever-enthusiastic wife, Sarasu, is one for constant experimentation (sometimes foolhardy); the husband (who sometimes comes across as rather slow-witted) observes her efforts at reaching out to her sky-high aspirations with a degree of equanimity.

By the time *Koravanji* stopped publication in 1967 several other 'family' magazines had been established in Kannada, which made it possible for Sunandamma to continue writing.

Honours and awards came Sunandamma's way rather late in life, but when they did, they came in a row. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award, the Rajyotsava Award and the Attimabbe Award. From a person who had to wait for someone else to post her articles to magazines, Sunandamma gained enough confidence and independence over the years to start a collective of women writers—she was the founder-president of the Kannada Lekhakiyara Sangha.

In her personal life and her writing career, spanning well over half a century, Sunandamma has managed a remarkable balancing act—while breaking stereotypes and treading unconventional ground, she has managed not to offend the middle-class moral sensibility.

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In the introduction to your complete works your contemporary, humorist Aa. Ra. Mitra, says that you took to writing even though you had no economic compulsion to do so, either in the household you were born into or the household you entered after marriage. Can you elaborate on this?

Well, those were times when the question of 'economic compulsion' simply did not arise for a writer. When I started writing some 60 years ago, nobody paid us for any writing, nor did we expect to be paid. It was not the hope of economic gain but a kind of inner pressure that made me write.

What do you mean by inner pressure?

I was only eight when I began to feel this great urge to write something. I wrote a poem for a monthly magazine called *Makkata Pustaka.* I was thrilled when it got published—a children's magazine was a rare thing those days. Later, I started writing short stories but there were very few avenues for publication—there were almost no magazines in Kannada. *Thayinadu, Vishwa Karnataka* and *Nava Jeevana* were three popular dailies, and two of them published a story each on Sundays. I was 12 when I started publishing stories in these dailies. It was always a harmless hobby, not taken seriously even by my parents and well-wishers. At most they would say, "Oh, Sunanda has written a poem," and leave it at that. They didn't seem to take any notice of my special interest and aptitude.

That's how it began. I was actually married by then—I was 11 when I got married, but marriage those days was really like a long engagement. He was a student then, and had to finish his B.A. and later his L.L.B. While he continued his prolonged studies, I was able to stay with my parents and continue mine. I wrote for these dailies when I was still in high school, but there was a long stretch of time in which I wrote absolutely nothing. I didn't write after high school and this lull continued after I shifted to my in-laws' house in Tumkur.

Then my husband was transferred to Bangalore and we started our family in the city. By then a few magazines like *Kathavali* and *Kathegara* had started publishing in Kannada, and I began to write stories again. I used to read a lot of Maupassant and tried to adapt his stories to my own style. The stories I wrote became quite popular.

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How did your family react to your writing, especially your in-laws and husband?

The atmosphere in Tumkur was totally inimical to any creative work. It was a large, conservative joint family, there were so many people to attend to. There was no question of writing or even reading, I couldn't do any kind of literary work there. Though my in-laws were related to my family, the conservative atmosphere in their house was very different from the relative freedom I was used to at my parents' place. My father was a senior officer and we kept travelling from place to place, so the restrictions at my in-laws' house did not quite agree with my system. But I didn't have to stay in Tumkur for long.

Your schooling was an adventure in itself, wasn't it?

As I said, my father kept getting transferred to new places every three years, and most places we went to did not have girls' schools. But my parents were very progressive people for their time—they wanted their children to study at any cost. My mother herself came from a progressive family and could even read and write English quite fluently. My father would be the most senior officer in any town we went to. There would be a municipal library of which he himself would be president most of the time—that was how I got plenty of books to read! I would read almost all the books my parents brought for themselves. They were mostly English. When I think back I wonder how I even understood them! I got to read only a few Kannada books by Galaganatha, M.S. Puttanna, and translations of Bengali works by B. Venkatachar. I was simply crazy about reading.

My father was transferred to Tarikere. There was no girls' school there, so they admitted me to the boys' middle-school. I would stand first in the exams and the boys found that difficult to digest. In fact, the parents of the boys came to the headmaster and threatened to complain to higher officials and have him dismissed if I was kept in the school. So he got scared and sent me home. I can still remember, it was on a burning hot afternoon that he sent me home with a servant. But my mother was adamant. She made sure a teacher from the same school came home and gave me tuitions. I finished my L.S. (equivalent of today's 7th standard) in 1929.

Then my father was transferred to Davanagere where there was a

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boys' high school. I joined first year high school (what they called 4th form) and studied for three years without too many problems. I had a teacher called S.V. Srinivasa Rao, who later went to America and became quite famous. On my last day of school he gave me a copy of Gandhiji's autobiography, translated by Nittoor Srinivasa Rao and his wife. He told me that my language was good and that I should continue writing and translating.

By the time I got to SSLC my father was transferred to Bangalore —that was in 1932. It was only then that I sat with other girls in a class!

What was it like to be surrounded by boys?

The first year was a little embarrassing, but I got used to it. I always had a separate table and chair, away from the boys' benches. I could enter the class only after the bell rang—till then I sat in a place specially designated for me near the principal's chamber. The place even had a screen! One of the servants in the house would escort me to school, all the way upto my place next to the principal's chamber. My father was a magistrate so there were plenty of servants—and even police constables!—to escort me. They would fetch me back during the interval. It worked quite well—I wouldn't look at the boys and they wouldn't talk to me.

You had no friends in your class all those years?

None at all. Not a single boy had so much as spoken to me. Neither had I. I would open my mouth only when the teacher asked me a question.

What happened after you came to Bangalore?

I joined the Vani Vilas Institute. That was a time when there were only two high schools for girls even in Bangalore. One was the Vani Vilas Institute and the other was the London Mission School, that later came to be called Mitralaya School. After passing my SSLC in the first division I joined the Women's Intermediate College. I was able to continue my education because my husband had not yet finished his law course, but there were great protests from my in-laws. They wrote letter after letter to my parents telling them to stop my

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education but my parents paid no heed to that, so I studied for two more years and finished my intermediate. I couldn't go to college for three months because I was down with typhoid, but I stood first in class in the exams that followed. I had a teacher called Mrs. Hensman who praised my effort in the college assembly and said, "You are a brave soldier. Keep it up." Whenever there's a crisis, I remember her words.

After my Intermediate, I would have had to go to Central College to continue my education. This was when my in-laws' protests became very serious. They said it was not befitting for a married woman to carry on with her studies, especially in a college with boys. I had to give up. But I still had two years to kill before I came to live with my husband, since he had not completed his law studies. So I passed three Hindi exams through the Mahila Seva Samaja in Basavanagudi. The place had a tennis club and I used to play tennis there—I was the tennis partner of Diwan Sir Mirza Ismail's daughter, Taj Mirza. She had somehow taken a liking to me. I made great use of those two years, even learnt embroidery!

As I said, till I came to live with my husband in Bangalore I hadn't written anything. It was after I started a family of my own in Basavanagudi, in 1941, that I picked up the pen again. My husband would be away at work from around 9.30 in the morning till 6 or 6.30 in the evening, and I wouldn't have much to do during the day. Though I had two children in quick succession, they used to spend a lot of time at my mother's place. I had a son and a daughter. My daughter, especially, virtually grew up with my mother. That was when I remembered again that I can actually write!

Why that long gap?

I don't know why. I didn't even feel like writing, it was a kind of amnesia. There was nobody at home to ask why I wasn't writing, nobody to tell me that I could write well and that I should continue. It somehow simply went out of my life.

So how did you resume it?

After shifting to Bangalore my brother, who was studying engineering here, started bringing me magazines like *Kathavali* and *Kathegara*,

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which I read with interest. Those were the days when women couldn't dream of going out on their own to a shop to buy books. I didn't go out on my own even to buy provisions. Then, in 1942, M. Shivaram started the humour magazine, *Koravanji*. Shivaram was the doctor at my brother's hostel and he brought me the first issue of the magazine. "Our doctor has started this magazine on the lines of *Punch*. Why don't you try writing something for it?" he suggested. So I wrote an article for them and it came out quite well. I don't really know how! Shivaram wrote to me saying that people had liked it and I should write an article for them every month. I got letters from senior writers like G.P. Rajaratnam and Kasturi appreciating my work. That was how I became a humour writer—I didn't know till then that I was even inclined to humour! But once I started writing, it seemed to grow all on its own. It's a great wonder to me when I think about it. Those days women were expected to be dead serious even at home, especially in the presence of older men like a father or a grandfather! Maybe I was destined to make a mark in a male-dominated genre—I don't think any other woman in Kannada literature has dedicated her entire life to writing humour. I owe a great deal to *Koravanji*—in fact, people often called me "Koravanji Sunandamma"

I also owe a lot to All India Radio. Since its inception in Bangalore in 1955 till about 1999, I did so many broadcasts over Akashvani, wrote hundreds of plays and gave dozens of talks for AIR. It was a training camp of sorts for me since I wrote mostly in a lighter vein.

I can still remember that when I suffered a great personal tragedy 13 years ago, it was an Akashvani assignment that helped me recover by compelling me to take my mind off it and concentrate on my writing. (*Pauses*) Writing can really help you deal with life's difficulties.

How did your in-laws or your husband react to your increasing popularity?

Literature was a rather remote thing for my in-laws, so they neither helped me nor did any harm. But at some point people at my parents' place recognised that I had the potential to write. Not that they called me a 'writer', but they recognised that I wrote and they also started reading what I wrote. As for my husband, he never quite understood my interest. He would probably have understood it if it was some

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literature related to Puranas, but not everyone can appreciate humour! So I never expected any encouragement from him.

But he didn't tell you not to write, either. . .

No, he didn't. I probably wouldn't have listened to him even if he had asked me to stop, so I guess he didn't bother!

But lack of time was never a constraint?

No, not for me. But a lot of other women do have this problem. Anupama Niranjana, for instance, often told me that she sat down to write only after 11 at night. Things were difficult because she was also a doctor. She would tell me that she had made it something of a rule to write for at least an hour after 11. Today, many women prefer to write poetry, not many write novels. One of the reasons for this, I believe, is the time constraint. One feels this more acutely in the present time, I suppose. Most women today are working women—who today is writing novels the way Vani, M.K. Indira or Anupama did?

You've been the lone woman in an entirely male-dominated scene at many points in your life—first as the only girl in a boys' school and later as the only woman humorous writer. How have you negotiated this position?

There was hardly ever any direct interaction. I have already talked about what it was like in school, and after I started writing regularly for *Koravanji* I didn't set eyes on the editor, Shivaram, for the first ten years! I would simply write my article and send it by post. There was no occasion to meet. I met him for the first time at his daughter's wedding. Going to the wedding, in fact, was an adventure in itself. I couldn't gather the courage to go to his first daughter's wedding, which he held in Lalbagh. The second daughter's wedding was at his own house in Malleswaram, and I made up my mind to attend it. I got into a city bus, but I lived in Basavanagudi and knew nothing about Malleswaram! I asked the bus conductor about the route and got in. Fortunately, some other people in the bus were also headed for the marriage so I just followed them. Nobody recognised me at the wedding since no one had ever seen me! When I went to his elder daughter and introduced myself as T. Sunandamma, she was so happy.

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Lots of people came up and spoke to me. So, though I knew that all the others in the field were men, I hardly ever met them. It is only in the last few decades that so many literary programmes have begun to be organised and people now meet each other. An opportunity to meet other literary figures and participate in literary events came my way only after I turned 40—I had been writing for some 20 years by then! It was in 1979 that I was felicitated for the first time, but after this a string of awards came to me one after the other.

What do you feel when you look back at that period of isolation?
I feel sad, I wish I had been born 20 years later. People who write now have so many opportunities to travel and meet people. As I said, I began to write at a time when women could not even go out by themselves to buy vegetables. For a long time I didn't know what to do in a bank or a post office. I was 45 or 47 when my brother took me to the bank for the first time to deposit a cheque I had got for a piece I wrote in *Sudha* or *Mallige*. Writers hardly ever got paid till magazines like these began paying Rs. 15 per piece. *Sudha* paid Rs. 25.

The atmosphere must have been extremely suffocating . . .?
It certainly was. It can be very frustrating when you have written something but have to wait for someone to post it for you. But gradually we women did start moving out on our own. It was great when city buses came to Bangalore! One paid one anna to go all the way to City Market—that was great! Things began to change and I, too, changed with the times. Over a period of time I grew bold enough to go to other cities all on my own.

What guided your choice of topics?
I almost always picked something contemporary. Then, I may have written about firewood and brass vessels, but now I write about the Internet! I recently wrote a humorous play on a cyber wedding for Doordarshan. My early creations, the couple Sarasu and Mailariah, are old people in my more recent writings. One of their daughters actually gets married to a Frenchman!

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Men have a world of experience that they acquire because of free mobility, but you were denied this. How did you compensate?

Mostly through newspapers. Later, listening to and working with All India Radio also opened up a new world of experience to me. Then I observed the people who lived around me. For instance, I watched with great interest the goings-on in middle-class families that lived in the Basavanagudi area—this was how I created Sarasu and Mailariah. I couldn't have written about many other things because I simply hadn't seen any of it, but I have tried to incorporate a broader range in my later work. Those days, I also read a lot of books by P.G. Wodehouse and was greatly influenced by his writing.

Your creation, Sarasu, is a very adventurous character. She seems to have the mobility you didn't have in your own life. . .

Yes, yes, you could even say that my husband is a little like Mailariah! Like him, he was the kind who remained unperturbed. Sarasu tries new things, she succeeds sometimes and fails at others.

As a woman, how is your brand of humour different from that of male humorists? I ask this especially because women and their so-called idiosyncratic ways tend to be the butt of most jokes in male humour writing.

My humour is perhaps more domestic. I grew up believing that women need not be inferior to men in any way, so there was no question of portraying women in a bad light in my writings.

Given that the parameters of a literary genre are set by men, did you also feel a compulsion to portray women in the already established mould?

I may even have done it sometimes. I have, for instance, written about women who want to show off a granddaughter who has come from abroad. Some women are like that, aren't they? But I have also written about men and their blunt wit, and so on.

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You must have seen women being oppressed in so many ways around you. Did you ever feel like writing about these things on a more serious note?

I did write about issues like women's education, child marriage and dowry in the very early years, but after I started writing for *Koravanji* and became established as a humorist, I wrote in a lighter vein even when I dealt with the dowry system or something else. But that doesn't mean I haven't done any kind of serious writing—I have written a book called *Adhunika Nage Sahithya* that talks about the history of humorous literature in Kannada. I have written a biography of Shivaram, I have written a couple of dance dramas for AIR and Doordarshan. I could perhaps have written more if I had tried, but no one recognises this genre of my writing since as I am too well established as a humour writer.

I have also tried my hand at writing a humorous novel, but have never been able to complete one. Somehow, I haven't been able to keep up the pace—it begins to sound very artificial after a point.

Do you regret not doing much serious writing?

Sometimes. I felt that way especially when the novels of M.K. Indira were made into films, but I don't really have any serious regrets. After all, my name is established in humorous literature in Kannada and I'm happy that I have a unique place in its history.

How have critics received your work?

Not much criticism has been written on humour itself—it comes in for severe criticism only when the writing is in bad taste or is really silly. I must admit that critics have not said too many severe things about my writing. One comment has been that I talk only about the upper-middle class, especially about the women of this class. But I can only write about what I have seen—it would sound artificial if I set out to write about life in a village, wouldn't it?

Have any of your works been translated?

Not many. Some three or four articles have been translated and published in *Femina, Eve's Weekly* and *Woman's Era. Eve's Weekly* asked me for an article for one of their special issues and I translated it my-

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self. But since much of humour is specific to the language structure and culture, it often doesn't survive in another language. It might work in Tamil or Telugu, but not in English. Some of my works have, in fact, been translated into Telugu and Tamil.

You are the founder-president of Karnataka Lekhakiyara Sangha. How do you think this kind of association helps a writer?

It gives a sense of belonging and allows for exchanges. A lot of good work has been done by the association, but I think a lot more needs to be done. They can, for instance, help in publishing. Publishing is always particularly difficult for women. They may have financial constraints, but I think it is an important area and one where women need help. Lekhakiyara Sangha, for instance, helped me publish my complete works, though they are not publishers themselves. Such efforts are useful and more such works need to be done. But younger writers do not have the same sense of involvement with the association.

Did you ever feel 'forbidden', either directly or indirectly, from dealing with certain topics by virtue of being a woman?

Yes. Despite a liberal atmosphere, talking about some things was always forbidden. That hesitation never left me and I have never done what modern writers describe as 'open-minded' writing. This moral sense is so entrenched in my being that I think I carry it a little too far sometimes. I wrote a three-month serial for AIR on family planning but never used the word 'pregnant' in my entire script! I somehow avoided saying it directly even when the issue was family planning.

What specifically are the subjects you have never dealt with?

Well, I have never written about love or sex. Sringara rasa has always been out of bounds. At best I might have said, "He embraced her." That's my limit! I sometimes feel uncomfortable even reading such stuff.

What happened when Navya (modernist) literature ushered in a style of writing that placed a special emphasis on what you call 'open-minded' writing?

Modern writers did start writing about a lot of things openly, but I

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don't really regret not writing in that manner. I have never thought that I should write like Veena Shantheswara or Geetha Nagabhushana. Some people can write that way and other people can't, there is nothing wrong with either. Starting with Veena Shantheswara, a lot of women have written openly about a lot of things, but even to this day not all women writers can bring themselves to write about just anything. Even Usha Navaratnaram who wrote so many romantic novels, wrote little about sex.

Did you ever feel the urge to rebel and write about things forbidden?
No, I never had a rebellious attitude. Given my genre, I didn't feel the need for it, either.

Did you also choose a certain style of writing because it didn't require such rebelliousness?
Perhaps. People like M.K. Indira may have faced the kind of opposition that I never had to encounter—who knows? But they went ahead and wrote.

Why this hesitation even to this day, when such restrictions may not exist?
I guess it is our culture, just Indian culture. A lot of things haven't changed. When I watch the serials on various television channels, I think we are a century behind our times in the way we think. They are always showing women with pallus on their heads, touching the feet of elders. There is nothing 'modern' in our Hindi serials—they teach things like the husband is the lord and the husband's house is like a temple! *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and what have you, they all talk about girls being 'shown' to boys for marriage. Where are we heading? Why should women be portrayed like this even in these times? Why subject women to this humiliation?

Interviewed by Bageshree S.

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Mridula Garg

MRIDULA GARG (b. 1940) is one of Hindi literature's most eminent writers. Her literary output is considerable—in all she has published 17 books—and includes plays, short stories, novels, journalistic writing, and essays. Among her best-known novels are *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* (Her Place in the Sun), *Chittacobra*, *Kathgulab* (The Woodrose) and *Anitya* (The Half-way House).

In 1979 Mridula Garg became almost the first woman writer in India to be arrested on charges of obscenity for her novel, *Chittacobra*. Although she was never sentenced, news of her arrest created shockwaves in the literary world at the time. The fact that *Chittacobra* had been indicted by the administration, resulting in the arrest of the author, combined with the witch-hunt carried out earlier by the magazine, *Sarika*, had far-reaching repercussions for the author. Vulgar letters were published for over a year in more than a dozen issues of the magazine during 1979-80 in response to an extract of the book published in it, and her subsequent novels were denied due literary assessment. Even novels with diametrically different themes and treatment were condemned, unread, as "shock-value fiction". The most painful outcome was the victimization of her political and historical epic novel, *Anitya*, published a year later. She became known as one of "those women who wrote in order to shock".

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One fallout of all this was that Mridula Garg was denied important literary awards, honours and representations; but more importantly, for nearly a decade and a half, scores of women writers either shied away from expressing their innermost thoughts or took recourse to seeking the patronage of established male critics, editors, writers, and academy chiefs to protect their interests.

Notwithstanding this, Garg did not give up on or compromise her writing, but it is difficult to say whether her literary output was strengthened by her struggle. Could she have produced more path-breaking fiction with fewer hurdles to freedom of expression had she been uncensored? We may never know, but in 2001 Mridula Garg was awarded the Hammett-Hellman Award by Human Rights Watch for courageous writing.

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As someone who was arrested for a book you wrote, what have been your reactions to recent attempts at censorship by assorted groups of people?

I have always felt that censorship is something which just cannot achieve its objective. You see, whether it is arresting or sitting on a dharna—if what you want is that a particular book should not be read or that a film should not be seen, and you are very genuine about it, you really feel for society and you want to be responsible, then this is probably the worst way to do it, because in any case it just gives it undue publicity. So, even in a very limited sense, I think it's counter-productive. At most, if you want a positive result, you have to make people aware; so say what you want to say and say it in more and more effective ways, but there is absolutely no sense in trying to stop other people.

But what if I were to put it to you that the attempt is not to stop people from seeing or reading, but actually to stop them from writing in the first place?

That is the whole point. It's all about power, and if you control the minds of people, if they don't think, or at least don't think too much, then your power is greater.

So people don't dissent, you mean?

You see, if you don't allow any dissent at all, if you have a very fascist or dictatorial society, then everybody knows that they are not being allowed to dissent. So there is more dissent! Long ago Gore Vidal said that writers are important in countries which have dictatorships, because they know that they have a great impact on society. But in countries which swear by freedom of expression, where there is a big market controlling the economy, controlling power, they don't bother about writers and dissenters because they know that society doesn't care about them.

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*If you feel that dissent has to be allowed to prove that this is a society where freedom of speech is respected, then do you think that the recent attacks have been selective?**

They have definitely been selective. The attacks which have taken place recently have largely been communal.

The attack on Deepa Mehta was communal?

It's the same thing, you know, about Hindu sanskriti (culture). It's like making a fetish of what this sanskriti is, and whatever the Hindu system of values is, and a few people deciding what it is. I mean, I didn't know when I wrote that book—*Chittacobra*—that it was hurting anybody at all. There is nothing in it. But sexuality is the most explosive thing in India. Somehow, you know, in our language when we say 'bad character', it doesn't mean that someone is a liar or a thief, it's always sexual. I don't know, it must have happened I guess about the time when the Muslim invasions started taking place and we were very confused about what was right and what was wrong. But otherwise, you know, sexuality was not such a major thing at one time—but again, I guess, for the middle class it was always a big thing. And for the so-called upper castes also it was a big thing.

I want to ask you whether you ever felt more or less vulnerable as a writer after your experience with Chittacobra*?*

You know, it was not the arrest which bothered me so much. Of course, I was very frightened when it happened. I mean, any middle-class woman would be. After all, I hadn't been to jail during the freedom movement! So I was very frightened when it happened; ultimately, of course, I didn't have to go to prison but it lasted a whole year.

How was the arrest made?

First they came, then I was told that the warrant had been withdrawn,

* A series of attacks in 1999, 2000 and 2001 against painters, film-makers and journalists in India.

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then they said the file had been lost, then again there was something, then finally the arrest was made. So it was like a Damocles sword hanging over me—anything could happen. Now the arrest itself did not stop me from writing, which is apparent from the fact that I was writing quite a bit while all this was going on, and *Anitya* is a big novel. Not only is it a big novel, it needed a lot of research work, I had to collect a lot of books, all of which I continued to do. What I think, now when I analyse it, what must have been very difficult to take at a subconscious level was that the writing community as such did not come to my aid, it did not protest. There are two distinct things—one was their reaction to *Chittacobra* or to my other works, and the other was their reaction to the fact that a writer had been arrested and was being treated in this way. On both counts it was very difficult—it was very difficult for me to come to terms with this, that people were just enjoying it, it was just a bit of gossip—here's a young woman and all this is happening to her, and they're enjoying it—it was very difficult to take. But once I realised that it didn't make me feel any weaker, it didn't make me feel like stopping writing, I just thought, okay, it's another one of those things.

You see, when I wrote my first book it got a good response despite the fact that it was more outspoken than *Chittacobra*. It got a lot of good and bad reviews, people objected to it but there was no witch-hunt, and it also got an award. When your first book gets an award you feel very, very encouraged. The third and fourth story I wrote got prizes, the play that I wrote got an award from All India Radio, so all these things happened. My first book was published in 1975, the play was published in 1978, so within three years all these things happened to encourage me—they would be encouraging for anybody who's just started writing. In my case—since I was a first-generation writer, my elder sister (Manjul Bhagat) and I started writing at the same time—I didn't have a role model. I didn't know how writers behave, I didn't know that they are also expected to have a social interaction with critics and editors. I didn't know that, and had no way of knowing it.

I am giving you this background because it is important. Everybody in my family was a little unworldly; my father took part in the independence movement which itself is unworldly, and my mother was really unworldly. She was a rotten housewife, I mean she was

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really no housewife, she was a rotten mother, too. She was really no mother but she was a wonderful person, a very unusual person, very creative and very, very fond of literature. She read a lot in every possible language—so we were not very worldly-wise. Manjul, because she started writing at the same time, was no role model so we went through all the problems together. If anything, because more things happened to me, she was forewarned. But I was the first one to face all this. So, as far as social-literary behaviour was concerned, I was naïve. Because of that whatever I wrote, I never censored. In the beginning they were quite nice about it, you know. I was encouraged in the feeling that we are allowed total freedom in writing. So what happened with *Chittacobra* gave me a big shock, and what really hurt me, and hurts me even now was . . . not only did they question the book, not only did they criticize the book, the critics, the literary establishment, they questioned my credentials as a writer. They said that I had written that book in order to shock, to titillate. This is something which, to date, I haven't got over because, you see, my credentials were absolutely unquestionable. I could be a bad writer, I could be a rotten writer, but I was not a dishonest writer. Dishonesty was something that just wasn't there.

Do you think it would have been different if you were male?
Yes, absolutely. Not only would it have been different if I were a male writer, it would have been different if I was a woman with a patron. Even a powerful woman patron. For example, there is a powerful woman critic, Nirmala Jain, there was Sheila Sandhu, a very powerful publisher. . . Now I never tried to cultivate any kind of relationship with these people with that in mind. In fact, I was a total loner. My writing came out of that, because I was a loner, and there was no way I could connect to people. I used to act, but people don't realise that an actor is a loner. You see, you are connecting with people not as the person that you are but as somebody else, so it's all a performance, life becomes a performance.

When I got married and went a way from Delhi to a very, very small qasba . . . I couldn't teach there, I could not make it a career, and I did not have companionship because the men and women there were very different from what I was used to. But then I found that

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there was one thing I *could* do as a loner and that was to write. So I just shifted to writing, and it was so fulfilling that I gradually gave up acting because this was a vast stage, you know, where I was creating the characters and I was acting through them—I was performing. Now, with hindsight, I feel that maybe I was abrasive to the Hindi world because I was always acting. And I was not acting according to the rules laid down by them, I never touched anybody's feet, I didn't defer to old age, I didn't say, *bazoorgh hain.* I've never been able to understand—how does it help? How does it help if you are older than me? But it is part of our whole culture, and I must have been very aggressive. I was an outsider. Gradually I learnt that if I am an outsider, and *I feel* I am an outsider then *they* must also feel that I am an outsider, and they treat me like one.

Has this changed at all?

To some extent it has changed, to some extent. There is a little more of experimental writing being done by women, with the result that now they feel a sort of affinity with me and they also tell me, these younger women like Anamika and Chitra Mudgal, that you are in example, if you can do it, we can do it. After all, you didn't compromise . . . and then, you know, I think *I* have changed, because I realised that I was aggressive, that this we can't fight—age is important in India. So as I grow older—you know, I still never tell anybody that I am older—I think my age is in my favour.

So, your writing did suffer?

Yes, I think at a subconscious level . . . you know, Ritu, to be very frank, it matters to me to have my writing acknowledged. It may not matter to some people but it matters to me—what doesn't matter to me is disagreement and dissent or criticising my way of thinking—that doesn't matter, but questioning my credentials as a writer, misreading my work and ignoring me, that does . . . If they prepare a list of writers of the last 30 years and don't include me, it matters to me. I mean, I am being absolutely frank about it, I would like to have awards. I don't need the money, but an award opens so many avenues. . . I have things to say, I speak well, but I am not just an orator, and those things will get said only if I am given an opportunity to be

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on the dais, because everything doesn't get said in the writing. I have to respond to people if I disagree, only then will new points emerge. If I'm not a Sahitya Akademi Award winner they will not ask me to speak at Sahitya Akademi functions. My books are not being translated—this is only one example, but there are other things. If a delegation is being sent abroad I am not sent, though I probably have more to say than others. Things like that do matter. I enjoy being on the stage, you know, I enjoy reading my stories. It's like a performance, and I love it!

You said something that I want to ask you about. You said Manjul was not a role model for you, that sometimes things happened that actually became like a warning for her. What did you mean by that?

You see, Manjul was very much into acceptance. Though she was very, very strong, a very strong person, she wanted to be accepted. She didn't write a lot of things because she wanted to be accepted by her in-laws, she wanted to be accepted by society, she wanted to be accepted by everyone and she was really loved by people. Yet, you know if she really believed in something, she would fight. She would fight to the extent that she didn't have a penny, she was in great need of money, but she would just refuse to do a telescript or whatever. But acceptance meant a lot to her, and as far as sexuality was concerned, her ideas were very orthodox. After *Chittacobra* I think she was very wary, although she was a bulwark for me, she was my main strength at that time. What you have to appreciate is that she didn't believe in it! She told me, first of all, what I should do was to remove those two pages from the next edition. In any case, she said, five editions have been published, a sixth will be published, so you remove those two pages. She thought I had done wrong by writing those pages, yet she believed they had no business to prevent a writer from writing. So she did everything she could, she wrote to the *Sarika* editor—hers was the most virulent letter of all and she had this command over the language which really used to hit people. She went with me to meet the Lt. Governor; she did everything possible. She did all that, yet she kept telling me I must remove those two pages from the next edition, which I didn't do. Okay. I didn't do it but she didn't abandon me. Even when my first book was published, *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop*—

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in that book this woman divorces her husband and after four years she meets him, by chance, and feels very drawn to him, talks with him and then sleeps with him. Manjul told me I must take this bit out. She could not have sex with him! This was my first novel and she says, no. Why? I said, why will she not have it? She said, that is not the point, she may have it but you must not write about it because people will not like it. She was very clear about that. She said, this is your first novel and they will all read it, and they will not like it. They are going to pillory you for it, and they are not going to give your novel a proper reading. Which was very canny, very right, you know. I, of course, just laughed at that time. It was my first novel, it had got an award and had rave reviews . . .

So you had already published it when she said this?
Yes, because I never showed her the manuscript. We never showed each other our scripts. The only script I showed her was *Kathgulab.*

So was it decorum?
It was decorum, and she was cannier and more socially aware . . .

I will ask you this again—do you think if you had been a man this question of decorum wouldn't have been as important?
Absolutely. You see, the point is that she *knew* they would not object if I was a man. She had no problems with my writing anything, her problem was that she knew they would not accept it, the establishment would not accept, and I would suffer for it. And when *Chittacobra* happened they started criticising that also. You see, the difference is that when I wrote *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* it was published by Rajendra Yadav from Akshar Prakashan and he was supportive of it, and since he had a certain clout . . . in any case it was something to discuss, the story was like that and it got an award, and also none of them had seen me. So there was a lot of mystique around it—some girl whom we haven't seen, haven't heard of, who hasn't done Hindi, has gone and written . . . and I remember Kamleshwar mentioned it, all the big-wigs were sort of . . . I think, by the time *Chittacobra* happened there was a lot of jealousy and the jealousy was more evident among women. I don't think that *Chittacobra* morally offended them

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more than *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* but it hurt their egos, the male ego, and that combined with the fact that in four years I'd written four books—it became like, let's teach her a lesson. Then it got out of hand . . . After *Sarika* published those two pages from the book and carried that offensive letter by Suryabala, if I had gone to the editor in tears, if I had even rung him up or written him a tearful letter saying, what are you doing, my family and my children and my social status will be harmed, why are you doing this—it would have stopped. If I had said why don't you just publish an apology saying that I am sorry, if I'd done those things it would have stopped. I did nothing. I did absolutely nothing, and then when I did write a letter to him I wrote like a writer, saying publish my letter as a response, which he didn't do.

You see, it was this freedom . . . and by that time, Rajendra Yadav —my first three books were published by Akshar Prakashan but this was published by National Publishing House, not by Yadav. I hadn't shown him the script. *Vanshaj* got ruined, I think, because of Yadav, because when I showed him the script which was like stream of consciousness, it went here and there, he said, it was very badly crafted, loosely crafted, and because the theme was not . . . I was not in it. So, naturally, when Yadav said that, I said okay, I can write it as a straight story and I did. It was only later that I found that's not my style, none of my other books were written in that way, it was a kind of experiment.

You see, what happened with *Chittacobra* was not just what happened to *Chittacobra*, it affected all my other books which came later, which were very important. They were rejected. As I said earlier, it's like you rape a woman and she becomes the one who has committed the crime. So that is what happened—they wouldn't even read the book, just condemn it, a person like Vatsyayan could tell me—it was so strange, he read it, I don't know why, somebody gave it to him or he read a review of it which was good, he told me "*Badi tareef ki hai aapki,*" he said, "*baat kar sakte hain, aap chahen to*" (we can talk about it if you wish), which of course meant that I should go to him. So I went, and he told me, "Anitya *padne ke baad hamne* Chittacobra *pada kyunki hamne sirf uski bahas padi thi* Sarika *mein.*" (All I've read about is the controversy.) Now, if it could put off a man like Vatsyayan, you can imagine what must have happened . . .

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I now think, to tell you the truth, that maybe those two pages were not worth it. Maybe Manjul was right, "*Agar woh do* page *nikal dete to kya fark padta.*" (What difference will it make if you remove those two pages.) But the damage had been done. She was right, they never read *Anitya* properly. My main pain is that when I wrote a political novel, or when I wrote—you know, I don't write about sex, I write about issues and major social issues, they never talked about the novel. Even though it got a lot of reviews at that time I could not redeem myself. Even now. But now I have decided to withdraw. I don't go around being nice to people to put it very, very bluntly. But look at Maitreyi Pushpa, she writes about sex with such abandon *to, kuch nahin*. . . Look at Manohar Shyam Joshi, Krishna Baldev Vaid . . . but I don't think a book like *Chittacobra* was written even later because they are not dealing with *issues*, they are only talking about sex. But I am talking about other things. . . A man can blow his own trumpet, for women it's more difficult. People say you're analysing your own book! And Manjul was wary, she said if I talk positively about your book they will say it's because I'm your sister, yet when *I* talk positively about Manjul's book, that is never said!

I want to just ask you about yeh kirti judne ki jo baat hai *(this business about fame)—now, notoriety has often worked in men's favour—not always, I don't want to make any simplistic statement, but notoriety may not have that same long-term effect on men . . . Surely there is a context in which all this happens, who it is in the literary domain who makes the decisions . . .*

Absolutely. Because you see, whether the important people are men or women the value system is totally patriarchal. There is no doubt about it, only thing is how do you fight it. You see, you have to fight it as an individual in literature. You cannot fight it as a group because, you see . . . what you said in your report, that there was less sisterhood—when you are in competition, then men and women behave in the same way.

You said the other day that there are three very powerful metaphors in women's writing—the metaphor of guilt, the metaphor of motherhood and the metaphor of sexuality. And you said that, actually,

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women have transformed them, that this has been one of the most significant developments in women's writing . . . could you expand on this?

About motherhood, you know, what I feel is—the whole idea of giving birth, and not only giving birth but giving it within marriage, is patriarchal. Because if you were really celebrating *motherhood* then you would celebrate the unwed mother, too—which never happens. In fact she has been an absolute pariah. So that is one. The other is that giving birth is not about nurturing, primarily; what was celebrated and glorified was nurturing too, but giving birth was essential. Now one thing that has happened is that you don't really have to give birth in order to nurture.

You think that this is one of the transformative acts of women's writing?

Yes, after the '70s. Bringing up a child outside marriage or keeping a child without being its biological mother has been written about. At the same time abortion is another way of negating motherhood—that also is happening; or not aborting, keeping the child even as an unwed mother. Then the second aspect is this whole eco-feminism concept, the very idea of nurturing—nurturing the environment, nurturing institutions, nurturing life, anything. For me the idea of friendship is also a part of nurturing. You see, earlier friendship had to be between women but that was an extension of the motherhood thing—if you were looking out for other women, or confiding in them and creating a kind of psychological support system *to woh bhi ek* motherhood *ka hissa hota hai* that was also a kind of mothering. Friendship is part of nurturing because you nurture the friend, so friendship between a man and a woman is nurturing without mothering, nurturing outside the family.

Then this whole idea of a maternal instinct—if it is an instinct then it can also be paternal, and the moment a man's nurturing instincts are recognized, both by men and women, friendship becomes easier and patriarchy is automatically undermined. I don't say that this has reached its full flowering in women's writing but they *are* doing it, it is happening. It will take a lot of time for it to really flower because they don't, you know, do it deliberately, it is just happening.

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What about guilt?

Getting rid of guilt is very important, and that is something which is *really* happening. It has happened with me, and it has happened with a few other people. As I said, it all came out of the fallen woman syndrome. People found it very difficult to give up the fallen woman syndrome because it was such a treasure trove, and it was the necessary counterpoint to the good woman. But a good woman was a bore in literature. If you didn't have this fallen woman, if you didn't have her raving and ranting and all that guilt—*prayaschit*, you know—what do you write about, how do you portray a woman? As Jainendra ji said, *Aazadi milne ke baad likhenge kya?* After freedom, what? In other words oppression is the necessary condition for interesting fiction.

All women suffer from this guilt. All extramarital relationships—Krishna Sobti's woman comes back—all western literature, after everything has been done she wants her home and she wants her child back, if she has a child. Now, women have got rid of it to this extent that there is no guilt about having sexual relationships. The celebration of sexuality came a little later in writing, it started with, say, Krishna Sobti or even earlier, Ismat Chughtai. Women had started talking about sexuality. The first thing which happened was that there was no guilt in enjoying sex, then there was no guilt in extra-marital relationships—I don't know who wrote about it first, I think I may have been one of the first. The thing about *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* was not that the protagonist had an affair but that she was free from guilt about it. Then I developed it further, its philosophical implications. And then—rape. The idea of the disassociation of rape from dishonour was very important.

(*Pause*)

Do your family members read what you write?

I don't think they ever read anything of mine earlier, but now they have started. I realised that at the time of the *Chittacobra kissa*—*Sarika* used to come to my brother-in-law's house and my elder sister-in-law who is a Ph.D. in Hindi read it but nobody ever talked about it, nobody ever asked me, what's happening . . . When the whole arrest business happened I took my youngest brother-in-law to see (L.M.)

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Singhvi—not a question, no comment, no gossip, and I realised that they had decided to shut that out totally, to the extent that when I said *subah mein* busy *hoti hun* (I'm busy in the mornings) or *main America ja rahi hun mujhe* paper *likhna hai* (I have to write a paper because I'm going to America) I made it very clear that mornings were for writing, they would say, *haan subah to ghar ka bahut kam hota hai.* (Oh, yes, there's always housework to be done in the morning.) It was only when my father-in-law was dying that I realised he had read something of mine because in the hospital he told me, *Mridula, tum likhti to achcha ho par tum apni kahaniyan khatam kyon nahin karti?* (You write well, but why don't you ever finish your stories?) He was used to the classical tradition.

If we come back now to what you were saying about guilt—in addition to the guilt of motherhood and of the fallen woman, is there another guilt which is much more deep-seated in women, the guilt about giving voice? The woman who writes, the woman who articulates, as Fahmida Riaz said, writing gives you not only a voice but a face, meaning a public face and a public voice. I'm talking about the guilt of the woman who develops outside the familial and the domestic.

I have a problem with this, because although we develop other guilts like the neglect of children, neglect of the house etc., the real guilt is around sex. The problem is not being outside, but of neglecting the family. As far as raising your voice is concerned, why does it happen to writers and not to women operating in business or politics or any other sphere? What I feel is, the power structure in politics or business is very well defined, the moment you enter it you are accepted. In the writing world that whole thing is very ambiguous. Writing is an effeminate activity, it has been that for ages. Writing in Hindi for men was considered very effeminate, a non-Sanskritic activity, it was not considered fit for a male. Writing in Hindi it was a woman's activity—Urdu was male, Hindi was female. I don't think that writing, putting pen to paper, is considered something 'not done' for women. What is considered not done—even choosing a subject is not laid down—what was most oppressive were the canons, you couldn't challenge canons. Mahadevi Varma conformed and she was praised by

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everyone, but Mirabai—what Mira did was to smash all the canons and so she had a real problem. If she had stayed home, written at home, cooked and cleaned, not gone and danced in the temple there would have been no problem. This constraint, this restriction about writing, is not true of India. Writing poetry, writing fiction—this is very much a feminine accomplishment . . .

> *But an accomplishment is a very different thing—it's like saying she's a good cook, she sews well, she can sing—and she also writes some poetry. That is an accomplishment, but I'm talking about writing as voice, writing as power . . .*

Well, in India's power hierarchy I think speaking as a politician is given much more weight than speaking as a writer. So I don't think that is true—it is true only as long as you are defying the canons, of which the most important are motherhood and sexual purity.

> *There are two other things that you have spoken of: one is the censorship that is inherent in language, and the second is something that you refer to again and again, which is the cerebral self in a woman. Not in contradiction, or even in opposition to, but always counterpointed, negatively, with the emotional and sentimental.*

There has always been this presumption of women being creatures of emotion rather than of the mind. And this is also linked to sexuality—either sexuality or motherhood. So women are emotional and, somewhere along the line, it was felt that this emotional persona was necessary to keep the tender part of the world alive, to keep humanity, the humanness of the world alive, and that became a woman's domain. So a woman is a creature of emotions and a man is more rational. He is more a creature of reason. Even if you don't say 'mind', it's reason against intuition. When you say let's have a heart-to-heart talk it's actually a mind-to-mind talk, isn't it? One person's mind is talking to the other person's mind and they are reading each other's thoughts, they're on the same wavelength—it's all to do with the mind. Women learnt that whatever rational or cerebral thoughts they have they should translate into intuition, or emotion. "I feel this way, I feel this is wrong," and so on, even though they had a logic and had worked it out logically. This became their role.

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And you think this is part of their writing as well?
Yes, it is the part of their writing, too. As an emotional being you are accepted. If your writing is emotional, tender, romantic, even sensual, it is accepted more than if it is cerebral.

So would you say that writers like Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Krishna Sobti are emotional?
Krishna Sobti is not at all cerebral, she's very emotional, in fact. Qurratulain Hyder is, Ismat Chughtai also—cerebral as in cynical and witty. Cynicism and wit come from an unromantic way of looking at life. Unlike Hindi, Urdu has a strong tradition of wit and satire. Ismat Chughtai somehow managed to put herself in the lineage of male writers—I feel she's quite an exception.

But no one held Qurratulain Hyder's mind against her . . .
With Qurratulain Hyder, she steered clear of sexuality. If she had also talked about sexuality with passion it would have been more difficult. To be cynical about sex is different.

Have you found this difficult in your writing?
I have found it very difficult. I have always been accused of being *boudhik*—intellectual.

You mean, you found it difficult to gain acceptance . . .
Yes. I didn't find it difficult to write because that's how I am. I write like that, I have this trait of analyzing things . . . and that's what's difficult for critics. When Rajee (Seth) wrote a review of *Kathgulab*, despite the fact Rajee has always been held up as very philosophical, she said it lacks innocence. There is an "innocence" which is recreated all the time. This is an accepted value in Hindi literature—for anyone, but I think more so for women. In any case, even for men, in Hindi literature there is very little satire in the true sense—you know, black humour. I think the only person who indulges in it is Manohar Shyam Joshi. They don't really accept it or excuse it even in men; in a woman it's totally inexcusable. You see, if you are cerebral and you make fun of things—if I write an essay, that's not so bad, but if you use satire in your writing it becomes a negative trait. What happens

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in India, all over India, not only in Hindi writing—either you are philosophical, that is accepted, or you are sentimental . . . Pathos is always overdone, understatements are rare, and wit is very rare. Cerebral becoming philosophical is accepted, but cerebral turning into a cynical or satirical exposition of things which are held in high regard —that is difficult to digest. It is particularly difficult coming from a woman because woman is the keeper of piety.

If one were to extend this, would you say that there is also the notion of the fit subject for women's writing?

To some extent. You see, I don't think there is a fit subject, as such, there's fit treatment. There is a canon about how to treat subject matter. Earlier it used to be: what do they know about war, what do they know about history, about politics—all those were taboo subjects. But now we're in every field so they don't say that any more. So much has been written about sexuality, for instance . . . So now it's how you treat it—are you totally shameless, or totally without values, or are you anti-Indian, westernized . . . even being irreligious is not so bad any more because the intellectual fashion is not to talk about god or soul, not to write anything about religion. A writer should be an atheist. Even women. But atheism should move towards philosophy—if you use this to smash accepted canons it's very problematic, again and again the question of sexual morality comes up. It's the same with the rejection of motherhood. If you say I don't want children, I don't love children and I will never love children—that is difficult to accept.

You have said that there is an inherent censorship in language . . .

The moment a language is formulated in order to express thought in a coherent way, it imposes that coherence on you and it imposes its own canons.

This in itself is not gendered but, you see, they managed to do that within that imposition—there are decent words and indecent words. Now, depending upon who is the keeper of decency, it will impose censorship on women or men. If a society is so vitiated that men are allowed a lot of leeway and women are not and are the keepers of morality, then naturally language will impose the most censorship on women. Women are the repositories of morality, they must

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not do anything immoral, they are always decent—they must not even show their emotions except to cry, and they cannot really show their love either. It is considered shameless to show your love openly—passion, at least. Even beauty—if they are very passionate about it, it is looked down upon. Using vibrant colours in painting—the few colours which are permitted are okay, but going berserk with them, experimenting with ragas, experimenting with colours—all breaking of canons and all questioning of religious rituals . . . each ritual has a language, it is a formalisation of language and you are not allowed to break it, so that imposes a censorship.

Now, if it is women who are performing the rituals—men may perform the yagnas but everyday rituals are performed by women—then the code of decency is much more rigid for women. Take abuse, for instance. If the image of woman is that of a sexual object, then naturally all the abuse words will be directed at women, or the lower castes. Language will develop like that to accommodate all these prejudices, and if you revolt against them you have to have a new language. It strikes me that all women writers use a language that is a mix of *tatsam-tadbhav* words, more than men, because we live on two different planes—on one plane we talk to the underclass—servants, dhobis—and also to the unlettered women of the household where we are using *tadbhav shabds*, and we have another life—we go to college, we read, we have books, we converse with other writers or scholars, where we use *tatsam* words. So when we write there are three types of language we use in writing—one is the language of experience, the other is the language of *chintan*, of thought, and then there is the language of *vichardhara*, of ideology. Now the language of *vichardhara* is always very basic because it develops like a ritual; it has fixed words and standard meanings and you cannot fool around with it. But the language of experience—because women experience on two planes, the language of experience has this mixture of *tadbhav-tatsam*, whereas the language of thought can be either, depending on how you think. It can be *tadbhav*, it can be *tatsam*, it can be a mixture. I want to make a distinction between *vichar* and *vichardhara*, because while thought develops into a *vichardhara*, it is then that all the canons are made, and it is then that it doesn't allow you to experiment. Since literature has to do with experimentation you need both

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the language of thought and the language of experience. Women mix *tatsam-tadbhav* more often. One is supposed to use *tatsam* as a literary language; now, how is that literary language to be modified? One way to do it is to keep on adding *tadbhav* words to it, more and more, and not only *tadbhav* which is part of the experience of males but the *tadbhav* that is very much a part of the experience of women—like the language of the kitchen. No man will use it, no man will use similes from the kitchen—now those occur in *tadbhav* words. One way to be 'decent' is not to use these *tadbhav* words—all the *tadbhav* words for sexual experience, for feeding the baby and so on are offensive to men. If you refer to menstruation using *tadbhav* words—my blood is flowing, *mera khoon ja raha hai*—that would be one way of breaking the censorship of language, developing this new idiom, where you say to hell with you, we're going to mix everything up and you can criticize us for it.

A lot of time women writers are criticized for not using a correct *bhasha*, the language is not right, because we are using *tadbhav* words. They aren't used to hearing them in literature. What I say is, that by using those abusive words which have been used by male writers to denigrate women you are not doing anything transformative; either you give new meaning to them or you use your own terminology, then you are really radicalizing language. It's a very simple kind of subversion which is also very subtle—male critics may laugh, and even women critics will laugh—but there are a lot of things you experience which have not been put into words so far, for which you have to forge new words.

How do you select subject matter and genre? You have used many different forms—is there a particular form for a particular subject?

It's very simple. I am a very spontaneous writer so I don't keep a diary, I don't keep journals, I don't write letters—I don't even have a very planned kind of outline or anything like that for a novel. If I have a very intense experience, and after a lapse of time if that experience in its original form remains intense, I usually write it as a story. If that experience gets added to and changes its character because of my memory and reading, then I will probably write it into a novel. I started with plays—I wrote a play very early on but I found that its

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performance meant that I had to depend on other people. That was a little difficult because I am not very good in a group, so after I had written one play, even when I felt like writing a play I turned to novel writing.

But life plays a very important role in this. I can understand when women say that they don't find the time that is why they can't write a novel or write poems or whatever, because there was a time when my husband had his office in the house and I had two children who were in school . . . somehow, I never found my children to be a disturbance to my writing a novel, I was used to their presence, but the presence of strangers in the house. . . . I developed a real fear that if I start writing a novel I will be disturbed, I will not be able to continue with it . . . this became one reason why I didn't write a novel, I think. But all the same I did write a play during that time, so if I had felt strongly about writing a novel I might have written one. If you have to write, you create the time, but if people are *deliberately* disturbing you—that also happens when you are very immersed in your work, the family feels neglected—and if you are not feeling strong enough to take their disturbance then a novel is a very difficult thing to write.

Have you ever censored yourself?

Not consciously. But as I said earlier, my writing *has* suffered, because those twelve years when I did not write a novel—between 1984–1996—whenever I thought of a topic, a theme which came very naturally to me, I thought they'll say this is no subject. If I wanted to write about the middle class I thought they'd say I shouldn't write about the middle-class, I should write about Dalits. Why write about women, or about love, what is there to write about in them? Lots of subjects came to me . . . I kept thinking, let me do something else. In that way there was an unconscious censorship, otherwise I might have written one or two more novels. From 1984 to 1989 I wrote a column for five years, it was one way of working out those problems, and I travelled around the country and wrote on social issues . . . You know, writing is such a demanding thing that one can postpone it on the slightest pretext. Take *Kathgulab*—the idea was with me for so long, I remember talking about it to various people. I want to write about women who are picked up from different parts of society, who yet are

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part of each other's life and I remember, Ritu, when I started writing *Kathgulab* I thought, well they criticize me all the time, anyway, so to hell with it, I'll write something that they will really find shocking. I'll do what they accuse me of, I'll write about the *strivimarsh*, the woman's point of view. No holds barred—I don't care. This was the first time that I didn't censor myself, because I have suffered from that.

How would you see your evolution as a writer?

I think I had a lot of confidence during the first five or six years of my writing. Gradually, I lost that confidence and I developed a very critical eye with regard to my work. I also became more conscious of language. Language as an instrument . . . Manohar Shyam Joshi told me, earlier you were over-confident, now you are confused. I think for a writer that's a good thing, to doubt. The more complex a picture is—it *should* confuse you, because I do believe that you shouldn't reach a definite conclusion about things, so I don't mind being confused. You can call it confusion, you can call it doubt, you can call it *jigyasa* or *shanka* which is at the root of all questing. Till I wrote *Chittacobra* or *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* I thought the majority of people think the way I do. It was a shock to me to realise that the majority of them don't think like that, so once I became conscious of that I also became critical. The moment you become critical you write less—because to that extent it's true, you do need a kind of innocence to be able to write—but I think a kind of cerebral maturity developed, a little less . . . playing with words. The playfulness has gone. But recently, the stories I have written—I think because I am trying to escape my morbidity I am writing more about light-hearted things, more magical reality, so that is one way of escaping depression. When I started writing I did not have a very strong will to live, *jijivisha*, I didn't have that, but Manjul did. I developed it as I started writing and, I think, you know—when they ask, how will you define being a woman, I say I define being a woman as being a writer. Because if I was not a woman, I would not have left Delhi after marriage, I would have continued teaching economics and I would have developed my cerebral self, but I would not have developed the other part which makes you write creatively. I wouldn't have had children, wouldn't have given birth. . . The children became the centre of my universe and I was very, very involved

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with them, I enjoyed them. They unleashed this creative energy. I participated in their childhood which is a very creative time, full of wonder, and that's when I started writing. So my being a woman is my being a writer, and that is how I developed a love of life. So the great capacity for unhappiness was balanced by the great love of life. It is not easily given up. Despite everything, this love of life has not gone away and I have continued writing. But now my writing is more of a performance—earlier my stories were very, very honest, reflecting what I felt. That is the difference.

Interviewed by Ritu Menon

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The Interviewers

Ammu Joseph is a journalist and media-watcher based in Bangalore, with a special interest in issues relating to gender, children, human development and peace. Her previous publications include *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues*, co-authored with Kalpana Sharma; *Women in Journalism: Making News* (2000); and *Terror, Counter-Terror: Women Speak Out* (2003), co-edited.

Vasanth Kannabiran is a feminist poet and founder member of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She was President of the Telengana Affiliated Colleges Teachers' Association. Vasanth has been a teacher of English literature for over two decades and a translator, and is co-author of *We Were Making History* (1992), co-author of *De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power* (2002), and co-editor of *Web of Deceit* by Moovalur Ramamirthammal (forthcoming).

Shirin Kudchedkar was the Head, Department of English at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, for 14 years. She has written extensively on feminist literary criticism and women writers. Among her published works are *Postmodernism and Feminism: Canadian Context* (ed.); *Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*; and *Violence Against Women* (co-ed). Currently she works at Awaaz-e-Niswaan, a women's organisation in Mumbai.

A. Mangai is the pen name of V. Padma who teaches English in Stella Maris College, Chennai. Active in the Tamil literary and cultural scene for over two decades, Mangai's real passion is theatre—over the years she has produced and directed several plays. Her collection of essays,

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Penn-arangam-tamil choozal traces her engagement with gender and Tamil literature.

Ritu Menon is a publisher and writer; she co-founded Kali for Women, India's first and oldest feminist press in 1984, and is active in the women's and women's studies movements in India and South Asia. She has co-edited several anthologies of stories by Indian women; a collection of essays on women, religion and development from India and Pakistan; and *Women Who Dared*, an anthology of autobiographical writing by twenty-one eminent Indian women. She is co-author of *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, and is working on a three country perspective on the Partition of India.

Gouri Salvi entered journalism in 1975 and has worked with a number of magazines over the years, and with the Women's Feature Service. Her areas of special interest are gender and development. She has edited *Development Retold: Voices from the Field*, and co-edited *Beijing! UN Fourth World Conference on Women*. Currently she is a freelancer based in Mumbai.

Sonal Shukla did her Masters in Gujarati literature and has Comparative Education as her special area of study. She worked in Gandhian educational institutions for 16 years. Active in the women's movement from the 1970s, she wrote a weekly column on women's issues in Gujarati for 20 years, and her papers and articles have been published extensively. She has co-edited *Indelible Ink—Daughters Write on Fathers*. Currently, she is the director of Vacha, Women's Resource Centre in Mumbai.

Prof. Sirajuddin has taught English literature at the Osmania University. An Urdu scholar he has been closely involved with translating the work of Urdu women writers.

Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran, Ritu Menon, Gouri Salvi and Volga are Core Group members of Women's WORLD.

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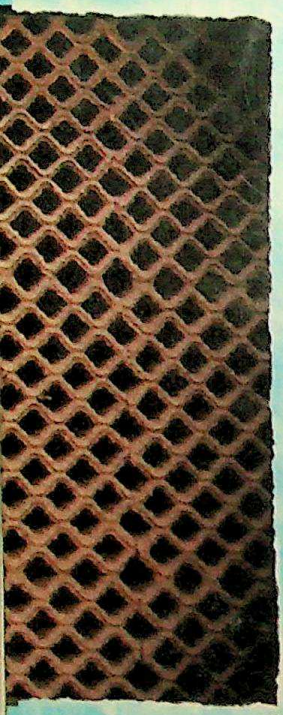

The interviews in this volume are the outcome of a series of workshops held with women writers during 1999-2001, on the question of gender-based censorship and related issues. Nearly 200 writers from ten Indian languages met to talk about the circumstances in which they write– and in which they are read and written about. They represented a true cross-section of society in terms of location, age, caste, community or religion, and genre; as the discussions progressed they unfolded a rich tapestry of experience and insight across languages and regions; gender and genre; caste and community.

The 17 writers in this anthology are among the best-known and best loved, writing in India today. As each one speaks of her own work with rare candour and transparent sincerity, she also subtly illuminates the particular context in which she writes.This counterpointing of the personal and political, the private and public, and the literary and social makes for accounts that are, at once, most unusual, yet deeply moving.

WOMEN'S WORLD INDIA

Asmita

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